The Law of Surprise

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The Law of Surprise

by SkyeMarsters

Summary

Hannibal is a witcher, a fierce warrior and slayer of monsters. He has always lived a life of solitude, never wishing for more, until he meets the son of a fisherman, and finds himself irresistably intrigued.

The fisherman's son, Will, is somewhat less enthused.

Notes

I am making my literary contribution to the Hannibal fandom by way of power-nerd crossover fanfiction. Though I placed our boys into the world of the Witcher, it should be enjoyable and easy enough to follow without having played the games or read the novels.

Thank you for reading, and I hope you enjoy it!

I'm on tumblr, too!
http://artbyvictoriaskye.tumblr.com/

Chapter 1

The weather turned foul that night, the pink evening sky fading into black, roiling clouds. Astride his horse, the man kept his head tilted back, presenting the cool and sharp planes of his face to the heavens. Raindrops fell warm and heavy across his skin, rogue droplets beading in the silver scruff of his beard. Neither man nor beast stiffened at the crack of lightning overhead, and neither jumped at the boom of thunder that swiftly followed. Both were quite used to travelling out of doors through roughened elements. If anything, they relished the storm. The summer rain rinsed away the cakes of sweat and dirt nestled unseemly in the man's braid. He disliked the time between access to fresh running water, preferring to bathe regularly and keep clean, or as clean as one of his kind could manage considering the messiness of his business. But the rain would do for now, ceaseless and cleansing.

The man was glad to be away from town and in the stillness of Velen's swamplands. As his horse, coat inky black, led an even trot through the thicket of trees, he savored the solitude. The last village he'd come upon had worn thin his nerves. Its tavern had been pitiable, its patrons pathetic. He'd heard tale of monsters in the swamp, whispers of hags and drowners. Eyebrows had risen curiously in his direction as he'd occupied a stool at the bar, but only the barmaid had nerve to speak to him.

"You're a strange one," she'd crooned in her too-high voice. The pitch of her words and the ribbons she wore in her honey blonde hair made her seem childish, and it annoyed the man sitting stoically before her, cradling his wine. His eyes fixed onto hers as he sipped, making her gasp. The corners of his mouth twitched, as if he couldn't decide between a smile and a grimace. He knew she was taken aback by his eyes, because everyone was. They shone beyond human brightness, with an outer ring of maroon, impossibly golden irises, and pupils like slits. Dangerous eyes. Abnormal and unsettling.

The barmaid broke away from the force of his stare and focused instead on the blondish grey hair that was swept back from the man's brow and plaited with leather string. Then her eyes shifted to his scars, one on the bridge of his nose, and a smattering of fine cuts across his cheek. He had more, of course. He had many more, hidden away beneath sleek armor. But the barmaid would never see the worst of it. Few ever did.

When the woman pulled her nosy eyes from the pleasing cupid's bow of the man's mouth, she finally took in the double swords fastened to his back. With a shaking breath, she set down the glass to the bar and squared her shoulders. "You're one of those freaks," she said softly. He'd not taken his eyes from her as she'd examined him, and now his gaze intensified. "Eyes like a wild thing. Two blades." She bit her lip and succumbed, looking in his eyes once more. "A witch."

The man sighed and fought to keep his eyes from rolling. Instead he narrowed them, his lips twitching, threatening a reveal of expression. "Witcher," he corrected. The woman's mouth opened in a little "o" and she dragged her dishrag absently across the surface of the bar, back and forth, her simple mind reeling.

“It’s been a long while since we had the likes of you here,” she continued after a time, finding the strength in her trembling limbs to fill his cup with more wine.

“And is there a need for the likes of me here?” ventured the man with a miniscule tilt of his head. He had, after all, headed into town with a purpose. Despite his antipathy for most people, from time to time he required their coin. He’d entered the tavern in search of contracts.

The woman stared dumbly. He knocked back the dregs of his cup and leaned in slightly. “Do you know of any townsfolk in need of a witcher’s skills?” he clarified. She shook her head and took his cup for rinsing.

“Don’t know of anything,” she answered in her insufferable squeak of a voice. “Folks do go missing all the time in the swamps though.”

It was not much, but for the witcher it was enough. He nodded once and stood from the stool. Then he quickly laid down his payment for the drinks and swept gracefully through the full tavern, ignoring the panicked murmurs and the hateful glares, and the one brave soul who yelled “FREAK” from across the room. The witcher left through the swinging doors, mounted his horse, and headed northward without looking back at the dirty cluster of homes and humans. He really had no patience for them. Any monsters he discovered in the swamplands, he truly believed, would be preferable company.

Now he rode with confidence in the treacherous thunderstorm, his eyesight supernaturally mutated and piercing through the dark. He could see how the trees swayed in the fierce winds. He could see how the swamp stretched endlessly ahead of him, a maze of narrow paths and bogs. And he could see the horde of drowners up ahead, swarming a fisherman’s boat. The wolf’s head medallion hanging from his neck began to vibrate.

He whispered in his horse’s ear, and with a whinny she was off, darting masterfully through the trees. The man pulled from the sheathe bound to his back a silver sword, and as they moved rapidly toward their prey, he raised it high, a snarl escaping from his lips.

The fisherman hadn’t meant to nod off, but he’d had so many drinks, you see. And as the sun had been setting pleasantly and his stomach was heavy with ale, was it so bad for him to close his eyes and relax for a spell? Hadn’t he been working hard? Hadn’t he earned the rest? Sure, he’d not caught anything that day or the day before, but that didn’t have a lick to do with how many drinks he had, despite what his boy told him. Accused of him, more like. So the fisherman had finished his last drink of the afternoon and closed his eyes and didn’t wake until the storm had come. Now he was awfully awake, soaking wet, surrounded by blasted drowners, and still a dash drunk.

Much unlike the witcher, the fisherman couldn’t see past his hands, where he swatted uselessly at the water-slick creatures trying to tip him from his boat. Only when the lightning struck a nearby tree did the sorry drunkard spot the menacing figure atop the horse. Maybe he was drunker than he’d thought, because the figure moved with impossible speed, throwing himself from the horse’s back with a show of unbelievable polish.

The witcher's timely arrival sparked the attention of the drowners, and half their mass moved away from the fisherman's boat to slip through the water toward their new mark. The man was ready for them, the silver gleam of his sword held steady before him. The others still tipped at the boat, but for the moment the witcher fixed his eerie eyes on the monsters directly ahead, clamoring from the banks of the swamp, reaching for him with their claws, with their gnarled, gaping mouths. The man took in a calming breath of air, and with a peaceful exhale, fell into the dance.

Silver sliced through rubbery flesh with little effort, followed by a spin and a decapitation to the drowner at his flank. A swift impalement of the creature in front of him, a thrust back, a kick, and a second, third, fourth taken down with a cyclonic spinning of metal. Blood seeped into the earth already moist with rainwater. Entranced; he could not stop until all was still and dead surrounding him. He took a blow to the shoulders, but he didn't feel it. He never felt it, he only destroyed, destroyed and cut and gored, until there was nothing left.

A scream penetrated the stillness, and the witcher turned his head to the place in the water where the fisherman had finally been toppled. The survey of a heartbeat informs him all the drowners are dead, save the two dragging the hapless fisherman beneath the water's surface. For a moment, the witcher stood at the swamp's edge, considering. Then he was in the water, swimming like a viper to the overturned boat. One of the drowners grasped at his booted foot, yanking him under, but he expected this, was ready for it, and the blade that found its way tucked deeply into the monster's neck was pulled out again with equal swiftness, bringing with its removal a blossoming cloud of red. The drowner floated away, dead. The second, the last, was dragging the fisherman away. The witcher pursued, the heaviness of his waterlogged armor not weighing him down because he was so strong, so fast. After a disappointingly short chase, he had his blade through the eye of the drowner, and he was holding the fisherman's head above the water.

When they had reached the surety of solid ground again, the reek of the fisherman finally breached the witcher's sensitivities, and the corners of his eyes crinkled in haughty disgust. It was an onslaught of body odor, fish, musky swamp, and ale. A wretched, rank smell. Dripping wet in the rain that still fell steadily, he put his silver sword in its place across his broad back, and addressed the sodden man splayed at his feet and apparently too drunk to be anything but mildly surprised at the preceding events.

"Your name please, fisherman," said the man standing tall and grand, almost ethereal in the curtains of rain.

The fisherman frowned stupidly at his savior. With zero mustered humility, he responded rudely, "Who's asking?"

The witcher hoisted the drunkard up by the collar until he stood wavering on unsteady feet in front of him. When the fisherman's eyes focused enough to discern the other man, his brows knotted together. "Would you look at those eyes," he mumbled aloud, followed by a belch.

It was almost enough to drive the witcher's sword through the miserable man's gut, finish him and let his rudeness drown in the swamp with his body. But that did not pave the way for payment, so he swallowed his resentment of the horrible man and with a deep, lilting accent said, "My name is Hannibal."

The fisherman blinked.

“Your name now. Please,” Hannibal ordered pleasantly.

“Aye, sir. It’s Graham,” grumbled the fisherman.

Hannibal nodded his thanks. “Perhaps we could discuss my payment, Graham,” he said in a tone more demanding than a simple suggestion. “I take it your residence is not far from here?”

“Aye, sir,” came Graham’s squinty-eyed response. “I live just down the way. Excuse my poor hearing, but I thought you said payment.”

“There is nothing wrong with your hearing. I saved you from the drowners, Graham,” said Hannibal in his cool drawl. “As I am a witcher, I have rendered you a service. And I always require payment for my services.”

The fisherman would have been appropriately intimidated by the witcher if his mind hadn’t been so weighed down by booze. So with a careless shrug, he spat, “Do I look like I got a coin to spare, witcher?”

“You look like a drowned, drunken rat,” said Hannibal calmly. “A rat I should have allowed to drown, maybe.” He took a step forward. “A rat I would still drown. With pleasure.”

The fisherman took a wobbly step backwards, almost falling into the swamp water behind him, before Hannibal reached a hand to grasp at his collar and steady him.

“I might not have much coin,” repeated Graham, “but it might be there’s something else for the taking at my house. I’ve got some wine goblets, a carpet. Do you play Gwent, Hannibal? I’ve almost a full deck.”

Hannibal doubted the fisherman owned anything that would be of interest to him, but he would look just the same. And he would be paid for his services, whether it be with the man’s old candlesticks or his blood. Hannibal always received his payment.

By the time the fisherman had staggered a path back to his house, which Hannibal observed to be more akin to a shack, the rain had tapered off marginally, and the thunder was finally moving away from them. The witcher led his horse as they entered the sparse clearing surrounding the ramshackle home. He whispered in the mare’s ear and she wandered a few feet off, dipping her head happily to chew at a dense patch of grass. Graham swayed by his front door. A miracle, honestly, that he was still standing.

“Not a fancy home, as you can see. But come in, come in, and we’ll have a drink. And you can dry yourself and take whatever you like,” he announced loudly as he rattled the doorknob. “Damn door. Boy was supposed to fix it today,” he cursed, turning to Hannibal. “Have you any children, witcher?”

Hannibal turned his head in a minute gesture, indicating “no.”

“Be thankful you don’t, sir. Be grateful you don’t.” He banged against the front door. “A damn nuisance. Useless, sly little things, really. No use at all, really.” Another round of fists pounded an unbearable rhythm against the door before the handle turned from the inside and creaked ajar. Hannibal could see the pale face in the darkness, peering out from the crack in the door. But the fisherman either didn’t see the boy standing there, or didn’t care, because he slammed the door wide open with a drunken strength that sent the boy crashing down to his backside. Graham entered the threshold and waved at Hannibal to follow.

It was a single-room home with a jumble of rags for a bed in one corner and a humble hearth in the other. The boy was painfully sprawled on the floor’s singular carpet. The fisherman wasted no time in filling the promised goblets with cheap-smelling ale, which Hannibal accepted mutely, striding past the pile of boy on the floor to stand in the warmth of the fire. The fisherman joined him, kicking at the boy as he passed, the only recognition of his presence.

“What a day, what a night, eh?” jeered Graham between lewd guzzles of ale. Hannibal’s eyes darted between the man at his side and the boy crumpled pathetically on the floor. The fisherman followed his straying glance and smacked a hand to his leg with a cackle. “See my whelp, Hannibal?” He laughed again and walked across the room to refill his cup. He spilt clumsy splashes down his front and onto the already dirty floor. “Look at that! What a mess!” he bellowed, pointing a fat finger at his son, who was finally setting himself straight from his spot on the carpet. “If he’d filled his father’s cup as a proper son would’ve done, it’d not have spilled so.”

On his return trip across the room with his full goblet of drink, he stopped in front of the boy, now standing, long enough to smack him hard across the cheek. Hannibal watched curiously as a deep blush spread over the boy’s face. “But he says I’m a drunk,” continued Graham as he took his place at the hearth beside Hannibal. “And he refuses to serve me drink, if you can believe it. And has the gall to act all affronted when I beat him for it.” Gulp, gulp, gulp. “The useless whelp. Boy! Refill Master Witcher’s cup. Don’t make me belt you.”

The useless whelp took up the jug of ale and crossed the room with slow, deliberate steps. When he reached Hannibal, he looked up from behind a dark fringe of curls, and set his bright blue eyes upon the witcher’s face.

Hannibal locked onto the gaze of the boy and held it fast. When the boy received a cuff on the ear from his father, Hannibal smiled. A small thing, hardly enough to be noticed.

“Don’t stare like a good-for-nothing, boy. Pour the Master Witcher his drink,” said the fisherman.

The boy gave his head a shake as if to rid himself of Hannibal’s eyes, and hastily poured more ale into the waiting man’s goblet.

“Now that was hard, wasn’t it?” Graham asked of the boy, before kicking at his ankles. “Leave us be. Go busy yourself.”

The boy walked to the opposite corner of the room, by the bed of rags, and sank to the ground. From his threadbare shirt pocket he pulled a carving knife. He picked a half-carved,

half-rotted piece of wood up from the floor and began to busy himself, blue eyes re-submerging behind soft curls.

Hannibal turned back to the fisherman after the boy had settled himself. He eyed the goblet in his hand warily. “I do believe the time has come we discuss my payment,” he said.

Graham lifted his own goblet with a smile on his weathered face, as if it wasn’t worth less than nothing. It certainly wasn’t worth Hannibal’s time. “You can have these fine golden goblets,” he announced with flourish, “and the carpet, threaded in Novigrad, mind you! And my word as a gentleman that any time you see me at the Velen markets, you’re welcome to all the fish you can fit in your basket!” He held his hand out to the witcher.

“No,” replied Hannibal. “I don’t think so.” The fisherman’s face twisted unpleasantly. “I’m afraid your goblets are not gold, your carpet is filthy and flea-ridden, and your word as a gentleman is worthless to me, as you are not one.”

“But sir, it’s all I have!” protested Graham desperately. Hannibal’s fingers twitched. He ached to wring them round the fisherman’s neck. If he could not be paid, he could at least be satisfied. But a little sound from the corner stopped his hand.

Blue eyes peered up from the woodcarving, not to meet Hannibal’s eyes, but to fix directly past them into the fire so they glowed with a strange heat. Lingering raindrops drummed serenely on the roof, and the witcher closed his eyes, tilting his head to listen to the unexpected sweetness of the sound. The pit pats of summer rain, the little breaths shuddering near inaudibly from the fisherman’s whelp.

Graham’s hand had long withdrawn, and now he clasped both hands around the goblet, sweaty, nervous.

“There is a custom.” Hannibal broke his reverie, opening his eyes and seeking the face of the fisherman. “You may have heard of it. When a witcher saves a life, that life offers a boon to the witcher. There is a story,” Hannibal said with a sudden lightness of spirit, “of a man saved by a witcher who could not repay him. The man said he was very poor. The witcher said ‘that’s fine. My boon will be the first thing I see when I enter your home.’ The poor man agreed. And do you know what the first thing was that the witcher saw, Graham?” Graham shook his head while Hannibal enjoyed a languid sip of ale.

“I don’t know. What’d he see?” the fisherman asked.

“The poor man’s son,” replied Hannibal. He set his goblet on the floor and made his way to the boy.

The fisherman watched, behind glazed eyes, as Hannibal hauled his son up from the ground. “I have heard of the custom,” he said meekly. “It has a name, sounds funny.”

The boy struggled to free himself from the witcher’s hold, but Hannibal’s hand imprisoned him by the back of the neck.

“Let go!” yelled the boy, and Hannibal’s ears pricked up at the first sound of his voice.

“It’s called the Law of Surprise,” Hannibal told the fisherman, stopping in front of him as he led his son along by the scruff. “Graham, I’m taking my boon.”

Graham could only nod, confused and unmoved. He didn’t meet his boy’s eyes, but he could feel them searing into the very depths of him. He sighed, knowing it would be a relief to never feel those eyes go through him again. When the witcher and his boon were gone and the door slammed shut behind them, Graham sat down by the fire in his soaking wet clothes and finished the ale Hannibal had left in his goblet.

Outside Graham’s home, the witcher struggled with his new charge.

“Where are you taking me? Let go!” the boy cried, thrashing his wiry limbs about in the skinny hopes of knocking himself free of his captor. Hannibal fought the boy’s attempts easily, and almost laughed at the weightlessness when he threw the boy atop his horse. He mounted behind him seconds later, securing an arm firmly around the boy’s waist, the other hand taking up the horse’s rein.

“I’m taking you to Kaer Morhen,” Hannibal answered, “where you shall train as my new apprentice.”

The boy pushed back violently against him, and Hannibal tightened the grip on his waist, keeping him held flush against his chest. “What’s your name, or do you prefer to be called ‘fisherman’s whelp’?” Hannibal asked as he spurred his horse to a canter.

“My name is Will,” said the boy pressed against him, “and I’m not going anywhere with you.” Hannibal was so amused by the boy’s antics that he came close to not seeing the carving knife coming for his neck. But Hannibal did see it, in plenty of time to grab the knife from Will and toss it into the swamp. The horse led them calmly down the paths while Will fought against him. Hannibal found his spirit amusing, but after long minutes of yelling and squirming, the novelty had grown tedious.

“Will,” Hannibal hushed, and to his mild enjoyment the boy turned around on the horse to look at him. When he did, Hannibal moved his hand in an elegant arch in front of Will’s face, and an Axii sign shimmered in the air, sparkled gaily, and faded. “Sit in the saddle and relax, Will.”

Will nodded agreeably and settled back against Hannibal’s chest, calm.

When the witcher’s rune finally wore off, it was like waking from a hazy daydream. Will was quite sure they had been riding all night, but he was seated now on a lush section of sweet grasses, his back leaned against the mossy softness of a tree. The rain had long stopped, and the sun was rising, beaming golden shafts through the breaks in the forest.

Will’s head pounded with the startling awareness he was far from his home in the swamp. Away from his father. Dragged away by – the unwilling apprentice took in his surroundings carefully. He did not see the man who had taken him. Leaning against the tree for support, he pulled himself to his feet and took a few steps forward. He turned in a paranoid circle,

hawkishly surveying the clearing, searching for the man, or the Master Witcher, as his father had called him.

It took a moment to spot him. In fact, it was his armor Will spotted first, laid finely over a low hanging branch, a puddle formed where the water had dripped relentlessly onto the soil beneath. Will lifted his hand to the black leather jerkin and set his palm upon it gently. It was hot from the sun, and unexpectedly soft. On the other side of the branch, half-obscured by a berry bush, was the owner of the jerkin.

Will observed him silently. The man sat on his knees, eyes shut, breathing slow and even, like he was sleeping. The boy urged himself to creep away slowly, but it was the first time since the night before he had been able to look at the witcher, and he was curious. So he watched the man for a few minutes, took him in. The first thing Will noted, of course, was that he was stripped down to his underclothes. His chest was bare, broad, and covered in a thick spread of grey hair. A silver medallion rested beneath his collarbone. A snarling, wolven figure.

Will brought his attention to the witcher's face. It was an unusual face, boasting regally sculpted cheekbones, a strong brow, and comely lips. A carefully trimmed beard framed his jaw, as dappled with silver as the hair on his head, which was hanging loose from its plait. He was an older man, Will knew, but only because he could feel the years. But the look of his face alone betrayed no absolute age.

He had enough scars to be a relic, scars Will found so interesting to study he had difficulty pulling himself away. But he had to pull away and make his escape before the witcher roused. So with the softest of steps, Will backed slowly away from the hanging armor, and the resting man. He stole a glance down at his feet, where muddy boots should have been. The boy felt an irk of annoyance that the man had removed his shoes, but the irritation lessened when he found them soon after, in the sunshine near the armor, cleaned free of the mud and dry, toasty even, as Will pulled them on with measured silence.

His clothes had not been removed, Will observed with relief, but were dry all the same, for the cloth was thin and worn. So clothed and booted, Will crept from the man's makeshift camp. He longed for the surety of his carving knife in his grasp, and it stung at his heart that it was long lost to the gruesome grime of the swamp. But he would do without. Will was an expert at doing without. When he'd tip-toed away fifty steps, he broke into a run.

A muscle beneath Hannibal's eye twitched. His lip quirked and he opened his eyes. The boy was gone.

A smile spread across Will's face after he'd been running for five minutes without being stopped. The man must have brought them west after leaving his house, Will speculated, because the earth was less soggy than he was used to, more solid. Easier to run on at any rate.

Hannibal hadn't bothered to put his armor back on before pursuing the boy. He'd merely stood from his meditation and followed his scent; a sweet and spicy plume revealing the

boy's chosen direction. And Hannibal had caught up swiftly, could already see him running yards ahead.

Will slowed his pace, ragged breaths wracking his body, indecision haunting his steps. He had distanced himself enough from the witcher, now he had to choose. Back to his father in the swamp? Was that a viable option? He knew of no other options available. He could not abide the idea of shelter in a town. Mind moving too quickly to continue walking, Will bit at his lower lip and pondered. It was when he was mid-ponder with eyes shut tight that Hannibal scooped him up.

"Argh!" Will yelped as his body was helplessly slung over the witcher's shoulder. He beat his fists against the man's back in outrage before realizing with a hot flush that he was practically naked.

"That's enough now," Hannibal told the boy in a soothing tone, turning them both to head back to their camp. Though as he walked with the boy's weight hanging over him, Hannibal realized Will was not so much a boy, but a young man. In the shadows of the stormy night, cowering on the ground, he had appeared so small. But in the daylight, lithe body heaving against him, Hannibal imagined his new charge must be at least sixteen.

"Will?" Hannibal asked the young man flailing in his grip. "It is not my wish to use my runes to calm you again. But if you keep digging your nails into my back, I'm afraid I'll have to insist." In truth, Hannibal did not mind the young man's clawing hands against his skin, but it was a disobedience he refused to condone.

He felt Will's body tense at the threat, but the nails retracted.

"So it was magic you used to drug me," said Will after a stretch of silence.

"A kind of magic, yes," Hannibal replied, pleased by the boy's switch to docility. "A rune sign to ease your fitful mind." He could almost feel Will's mind working through his words. "All witchers know a little magic. You will learn it in time."

"Why would I learn it?" was Will's quick response and Hannibal wished he could read the expression on the boy's face.

"As my apprentice I will strive to teach you all I know," said Hannibal.

"I am not your apprentice, witcher," said Will, keeping his voice calm while his heart beat rapidly against his chest. Hannibal could feel it. He licked his lips.

"You are a boon gifted to me by your father to use as I see fit," the witcher said with a briskness that brought a chill to Will's skin. "I have never had an apprentice." Hannibal had been intrigued by the young man knocked to the ground by his drunkard father, by the deep eyes, blue and bright, that had peered up at him, by the barely bottled energy filled to bursting.

He had been intrigued, terribly so, and that rampant curiosity made him hold the boy steadfast against his shoulder now.

“I have no interest in becoming your apprentice,” countered Will, trying to keep his body lax for he did not desire the witcher to use his rune-casting against him. “I know enough of your profession to know I want no part of it.”

Hannibal raised a pale eyebrow at the declaration. “What part of my profession offends you, Will?”

The boy expelled his sigh with a bitter laugh that made the corner of Hannibal’s eyes crinkle in amusement. “You are brutes, harbingers of violence and death.”

“And you are not violent,” said Hannibal.

“I abhor violence,” Will answered proudly.

“Yet the carving knife at the bottom of the swamp would have to disagree with you.” They were nearing the little camp, and Hannibal stopped. “I’m going to put you down now. You know better than to run, I think.”

He felt Will nod his head before settling him gently to the ground, and then took a step back to see him fully. Big eyes stared just past him through a tangle of dark hair. Hannibal was a head taller, making it necessary for Will to look up at him, and he rather liked that.

“Do you deny attempting violence against me last night?” Hannibal pressed.

It could not be denied. Will had tried to stab the man in the neck as he’d been carried off from his home. He swallowed the lump of shame in his throat and shook his head.

“I do not resent you for it,” eased Hannibal. “It was self defense. Do you find necessary violence so abhorrent?”

“Violence should never be a necessity,” Will responded weakly. He remembered with embarrassment the rush of adrenaline as he’d shoved the knife up for the plunge. His disappointment when he’d been stopped.

“Was violence necessary last night when I killed the creatures that would have killed your father?” Hannibal questioned.

“If you’d left him to die, today I would be free of him without being enslaved to you,” Will answered without a second’s thought.

“Not a slave,” corrected Hannibal. “Never a slave. My apprentice, Will. And your first act as my apprentice will be to help me dress.”

The older man gestured behind him, where Will knew his leather armor to be hanging over the branch. Eager enough for the man to be covered properly again, Will set himself to his task. He could help this witcher dress. He could travel with him for the day. He could do this knowing the man would need to sleep eventually and that when he slept, Will would make a

proper escape. He would make way back to the swamplands and lose himself for good. The witcher would forget him in short order, and Will would be free and solitary.

But currently, Hannibal stood in his breeches awaiting adornment. He appraised Will with wolfish eyes as the boy approached, his arms burdened with leather gear.

It turned out to be a relatively simple assignment; The black garment pulled over his head, a sleek chainmail covering fastened across his chest and stomach, studded plates over his shoulders. The boy was efficient and only brushed against Hannibal's bare skin once or twice.

"Will," Hannibal said softly to the boy, who was now lacing his boots. "I must insist on a few things pertaining to your apprenticeship." Will did not look up from his task, only signaled his attention with a tilt of his curly head. "Much as the dirt-besmirched peasant look becomes you, I will require you to bathe regularly, as I do. The grit of a witcher's life is no excuse for lackadaisical hygiene."

The fingers Will used to deftly lace the man's boot were dirty indeed. He did not argue the matter. He did not disagree.

"And your – attire – though appropriate for a swamp recluse, is unacceptable for a witcher's apprentice. Especially an apprentice who will be seen with me. So we will ride into the nearest town and seek the assistance of a merchant. It will have to do until we stop over in Novigrad, where you will have the best armor available, custom- made." He finished this speech as the boy finished with his boots and stood, just in time for Hannibal to catch the spark of panic in Will's eyes. "If your clothes are sentimental to you, we could keep the material. Fashion it for other uses."

Will shook his head, self conscious now of the unwashed hair swishing over his neck. A jolt of fear had touched him at the witcher's mention of town. But reminding himself he would be long gone before they reached the next town cured the uneasiness.

"I have no qualms in ridding myself of these rags, sir," said Will.

"I also require you to call me Hannibal," he said.

"So informal?"

"I'm a witcher, not a king," he said simply, spreading his gloved hands over his silver mane and pulling it back from his face. Hannibal turned from Will. "Fasten my hair, please."

Will was glad Hannibal was turned away and could not see him balk at the order. "Surely a king and not a witcher would demand for their hair to be fussed with," Will muttered to himself, but he took up the man's leather string anyway and proceeded to tie it back. Not in a braid, but in a simple tail that hung to the base of his neck. Will resisted a final sweep of his fingers through the hair and stepped away.

When Hannibal faced him again, it was with an unusually warm smile. "Thank you, Will," he said. "I'd tell you to bathe before we proceeded, but you'd only have to put those dirty

clothes back on, so we will wait until you have something fresh to wear."

Will lowered his eyes in obedience, and Hannibal brought a careful finger under the boy's chin and lifted his head.

"Remember, Will," he said, his voice almost a whisper, his accent curling around his words. "You're never a slave with me. It will not be like life with your father." He clicked his tongue for his horse, which appeared from the brush a few paces away. "Do you need assistance?" he asked Will, his intention clear.

"No thank you, Hannibal," the boy answered politely, stepping past the witcher to the horse's side. Will never had much occasion to mount a horse and now that he stood beside one, he was uncertain how best to continue. It must be as easy as placing a foot in the stirrup and hoisting oneself up and over, but when Will put his worn boot in the stirrup, the horse had the audacity to shift forward slightly, and he stumbled, ankle caught up in the straps.

When the hands came about his waist and lifted him safely into the saddle, Will hoped his blush was not too furious. "I could do it," he stammered while Hannibal seated himself astride the horse with enviable elegance.

"You certainly could have, Will," he agreed. "Pardon my reach," he added as his arms came around Will's waist to take the reins. Hannibal was extra cautious he not inflict his touch overly much on the boy sitting in front of him. "You will need your own horse in time, as well."

Will allowed himself a frown because he knew Hannibal could not see it. There would be no horse, of course. No armor, no apprenticeship past the day's journey. He patted the horse's neck with fondness. He had not been around horses often, hoarded away like he was in the swamp with his father, but they were admirable creatures, and Will was glad for the chance, however odd the circumstances, to be near one at last.

"What is her name?" he asked with genuine interest.

"Alas, she has never told me."

Will made a soft whine of protest and whipped his head around to glare at Hannibal. "You must give her a name, Hannibal. To leave her nameless is an insult."

A pause and then, "I think I would prefer it if you named her, Will."

The boy's eyes grew wide, and he turned to sit properly in the saddle, face forward. "That wouldn't be right. I hardly know her." He heard Hannibal's thoughtful grunt, felt the vibrations of it through his back.

"Then you can name her when you've made better acquaintance," allowed Hannibal. His voice did nothing to convey the pleasure in his words.

Will ran an anxious hand through his tangle of hair. It wasn't true. He would be gone come the next day, and the horse would be nameless forever. It wasn't right.

“Winston,” the boy said suddenly.

“Winston?” asked Hannibal, bemused. “For a lady?” The horse snuffed loudly at the name, and Will’s heart felt full for a fleeting moment.

“An unusual name for an unusual animal,” Will replied.

Hannibal hummed thoughtfully. “Is she so unusual?”

“She gets on with you, doesn’t she?” said the boy bluntly.

Hannibal held the reins in one hand, freeing his fingers to stroke Winston’s coal-black coat. He could not see Will’s face, but he could feel his smirking expression radiating off him in impish waves. Hannibal clicked his tongue. “Let’s go, Winston,” he said, and the mare brought her speed to a gallop that made Will squeak in surprise and hold tight to her neck.

Chapter 2

Though Will was delighted to be in such close contact with a horse, he was rather less enthused being plastered against the witcher all day. Even worse was the aching pain that grew increasingly intolerable in his backside. They had stopped throughout the day only once, to stretch their limbs and have a drink and a bite of hard bread. Will barely had the time to work the tingling from his thighs before Hannibal had him back in the saddle.

One positive thing Will could admit about Hannibal's company was that it was mostly quiet. The witcher was apparently a man of few words, and they rode the majority of the day in relative silence. It gave Will the opportunity to lose himself in his mind, and plan ahead for the evening to come, how he would escape.

And the evening fell swiftly upon them. Already the sun was moving low in the sky. They would doubtless be stopping soon to make camp, and Will's newest worry was that he would be too sore to run away when the opportunity presented itself.

When Hannibal brought Winston to a slow trot, Will was seized by an unsavory fluttering sensation in his stomach. It was nervousness, he knew, of the imminent nightfall. But Hannibal didn't bring Winston to a stop; instead, he turned him to lead down a narrow side road. Will could make out lights in the distance and a completely different anxiety clutched at his heart.

"Aren't we going to stop and set up camp?" Will asked, his voice small. "Before it gets too dark?"

Hannibal admired the setting sky, all a-swirl with pink and red and orange. "I have thought of something far more pleasing than another night on the unforgiving ground, Will," he said with an air of confidentiality. The boy seemed to freeze suddenly. Not the effect Hannibal had desired. "Will?"

"I'd much rather sleep here, among the trees," Will breathed, his body ringing with alarm, with the urge to flee. "I like the ground, Hannibal. It's what I'm used to. Let's just camp right where we are." He worried Hannibal could feel his heart beating its panicked rhythm through his clothes.

Hannibal kept Winston headed toward the town at a steady pace, but the behavior of the boy grew increasingly odd as the lights grew larger. "When was the last time you enjoyed a decent meal, Will? You'd be surprised how one's body and mood can benefit from a full belly and goodnight's sleep."

Will's fingers clenched and unclenched, his breathing became shallow little puffs of pathetic exhales and shaky inhales. He couldn't go into town. He couldn't go into town. They were getting closer, close enough for Will to make out the individual lantern posts, too close. "Hannibal," he pleaded between gasps.

The witcher was unsure what to make of the boy's display. He moved the reins to hold in one hand and with the other he pressed a palm to Will's forehead. "Are you unwell?"

Will squirmed beneath his touch. He couldn't go to town.

So he threw himself off the horse instead.

Hannibal halted Winston's steps immediately and jumped from her saddle. Will was already on his feet, running, miraculously uninjured, into the trees. It took Hannibal no time at all to catch up with him, even less time to grab him around the waist.

"Don't take me into town!" Will cried, fruitlessly twisting in Hannibal's hold.

"I offer you food and warmth and you make me a fool," Hannibal hissed. It was the first time Will had heard the witcher's voice so dangerously low, and it rendered him to stillness in his arms.

"No," Will said breathlessly, but Hannibal was already walking him back to the road, where Winston awaited them patiently. "No."

Hannibal stopped and spun Will around by the shoulders so they stood face to face. He examined the boy and found his cheeks reddened and damp, his eyes wild and wide. The conclusion seemed obvious enough. "An anxiety of people, after being so secluded for so long, is a normal reaction," he told Will. His voice had dropped its menacing undertone. He only wished to sooth now. "But you are joining me this evening." Wills eyes darted away. "Look at me, Will." Reluctant blue eyes met gold. "Shall I use my rune-casting on you?"

If Hannibal used his Axii sign, Will's chance of escape disappeared for the night. He would be trapped in another hypnotized, defenseless state. He shook his head adamantly. "I don't want you to use it," he told the witcher, for he would rather struggle for breath than struggle for a free mind. He would strive to keep his head down. It was a small village. He could keep his head down and try to tune it out. Years and years had passed since it had happened. There was a chance he remembered it being worse than it was. And he could sneak out of an inn as easily as he could sneak out of a campsite, couldn't he? It would be fine, he would be fine.

"I don't want to use it either," Hannibal confessed. He took Will by the arm, gently now, whistled for Winston to follow, and the three travelers continued down the road.

Will was trembling as Hannibal led him through the town of Lindenvale, though few were out of doors. It was, indeed, a terribly small scattering of homes with only the most basic of establishments; there was an inn with a tavern and a merchant set up across the dirt street. Hannibal walked Will to the door of the tavern then tied up Winston after palming her some sweets.

When he returned to Will's side, he handed him a leather pouch. "Order us supper, please, and I will be along shortly."

Will stared at the pouch.

“Drinks, as well. It will help your nerves,” Hannibal said. When Will remained unmoved save for his trembling, Hannibal nudged him toward the door. “I’ll be along shortly,” he repeated.

Will nodded, his hair falling across his eyes, and entered the tavern.

It was the first time in years Will had been surrounded by so many people, and it was instantly overwhelming. Drunken thoughts and lewd urges bounced luridly against the carefully laid walls of his brain, ripping through his veneer of calm. He crossed to a table farthest from the bar, and therefore the least occupied space in the room, and came to a nauseating lurch, his hands spreading over the smooth wood tabletop. He slid into a chair with his head down and closed his eyes, trying to will away the dizziness. But it throttled him, the energy, the people, and their feelings. The man staring at him from the bar had a mind rotten with perversions. The woman playing cards across the room was drunk and she echoed fuzzy and warped in Will’s head. The owner of the inn making his way through the crowd to Will had a tired, dull cloud surrounding him, and as he stood there and arched his ginger brow, the cloud engulfed Will, too, and he clenched a fistful of his hair to keep from screaming at the ache.

“What can I get you?” asked the innkeeper. He cared for few things in the world, and the sight of a scared young boy was neither new nor troubling to him.

But Will didn’t hear him. He could not hear past the vigorous stirring of emotion beating at his brain and ricocheting off his skull. He felt himself shaking, and yet he had no control over the convulsions. He had no control at all. The tavern, he felt suddenly sure, would be the place he died, for the shell of his body could not hold in as much as it absorbed. He would die shrieking as his skin burst, and still the thoughts, the feelings, the people would swim about his corpse.

A rough hand grabbed Will’s chin, jerking it up. The man with the filthy mind from the bar was leering at Will. His inky, sick essence filled him to toppling.

“What’s the matter with you, huh?” he asked, brutally shoving the boy’s head to the side. At Will’s hyperventilating response, he thrust a fist into Will’s curls and pulled him to his feet. The chair clattered over behind him, drawing the attention of the rest of the tavern.

“I’m talking to you, kid,” the man said. “You some kind of freak? Can’t talk?”

With all eyes, all attention on Will, it was too much. He gasped a lungful of thick air and groaned, like something pitiful dying. The man released him and Will’s head fell back, his eyes open and shining brilliantly.

“I wait until I see her blow out the candle. I sneak into the house when I think she’s fallen asleep. I’ve waited all week for her father to be away, and now I can have her all to myself. She fights back at first. They always fight back, but she stops when I get my belt around her neck.”

The words rattled from Will's mouth in a steady stream of coolly stated narrative. With every revealing sentence, the filthy-souled man took a step back. "Shut your mouth," he warned. "Shut your damned mouth, freak!"

But nothing reached Will any more; he was trapped in a prison of disgusting imagery. What the man had done he felt, he saw, he spoke. "It doesn't take me long to finish her, and then I finish inside of her. She'll never get to turn me down again. I'll throw her body in the river for the drowners, and no one will ever know."

"DEMON!" yelled the man. "This boy is the work of evil!"

"He's a witch, if ever I did see one."

"Someone send for a witch hunter!"

"Get that witch out of here!"

"No one touch that boy," came a hostile growl from the tavern door.

Will was on his knees where someone had shoved him, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. Hannibal quickened to his side and scooped him from the floor. He glared at the huddle of patrons and bared his teeth, furious. "Innkeep, I require lodgings for the night," he demanded.

The red-haired man bustled clumsily with his keyset and practically tripped over himself running up the stairs to open the door for Hannibal, who followed swiftly behind him with Will draped shivering in his arms.

"We will need dinner brought to our room," Hannibal informed him, his face adjusting back to its usual stoniness. "And hot water for the bath."

"Absolutely, Master Witcher. As soon as can be," he quivered. The innkeeper shot a worried glance at the crowd below; their whispering was deafening.

With Will still in his arms, Hannibal approached the railing and looked over the tavern. The candlelight lent his handsome features a devilish glow as he addressed the skittish humans.

"Here is your one chance at decency I will grant," he said, his voice carrying curt and concise over the quieted bar below. "There will be no summoning of witch hunters. There will be no speaking of this of any kind. If you are rude and disobey this simple request, I will kill you." And that is all Hannibal said, all that needed saying, before turning and entering the room, leaving the innkeeper to shuffle awkwardly down the stairs back into the mass of the befuddled tavern-dwellers.

Hannibal had been across the street paying the merchant when he'd heard someone yell "witch." He'd shoved the carefully selected purchases into his satchel and ran into the tavern to find Will shaking on the floor, surrounded.

Now he sat Will down on the edge of the bed, perplexed by the boy in tremors before him.

“Will, speak to me,” he commanded. The boy’s eyes were open, but rolling, the lids fluttering. His lips were parted for rattling, rapid breaths. He seemed not to hear Hannibal’s words at all. “Will,” he tried again. He raised his hands to frame Will’s face, let a battle-rough thumb skim over the delicate flesh of Will’s ear. Still, Will shook like a sad, vibrating thing beneath Hannibal’s touch. The witcher frowned. But when he made to lift his hands, the boy’s arms shot up, and he grasped Hannibal’s forearms with a desperate strength, holding him in place.

“Can you hear me, Will?” asked Hannibal. His voice was smooth, but his eyes were narrowed and severe.

To his relief, Will nodded, and Hannibal felt a miniscule release of tension he’d not been aware he was holding. “You seem to be having a mild attack, Will. I need you to keep breathing, but try and take deeper, slower breaths. Can you do that?”

Another head nod from Will, still shaking, still fastened tight to Hannibal.

“Close your eyes. Focus on my voice. You’re safe,” Hannibal gentled. The boy’s eyes slid shut. He took a deep, shuddering breath. “Good. Does that feel better?”

Will’s eyes reopened, but this time they focused lucidly on Hannibal. He parted his lips, dry from his panting, as if he would say something, but at that moment the innkeeper knocked on the door and politely brought in their supper on a large wooden tray.

Hannibal was mildly surprised by the voraciousness with which Will took to his plate. It would appear a mental exhaustion like the one he’d only just endured paled in comparison to years, possibly a lifetime, of hunger. They ate their dinner in silence while a maid ran in and out with large, sloshing buckets of hot water for the bath. When the last bucket was emptied and the last crumb eaten, Hannibal poured two glasses of wine.

“I apologize, Will,” he said.

Will picked up his glass and sipped it greedily.

“What happened downstairs was more than an attack of anxiety,” Hannibal said, a statement not a question, and Will shrugged. “I should not have brought you to town.”
That earned a bitter noise akin to a laugh from Will. “That’s a recurring theme in my life.”

Hannibal wove the story in his mind. “You lived with your father in the swamp. Tell me, Will, was it by choice? Or would no town have you because of your condition?”

Hannibal watched the boy finish the wine in his cup before answering with lips spread in a self-deprecating grin. “Spot on, Hannibal. My father was driven to drinking because he was stuck in the middle of nowhere with me. He was in the middle of nowhere with me, because my condition made pretty much every one uncomfortable, no matter what village we were in that week.” He held out his cup for Hannibal to refill, then took another sip. “I’m afraid you got the wrong end of the deal with my father, witcher.” Will leaned forward conspiratorially. “My presence is unbearable.”

“The only thing approaching unbearable about you is your, forgive me, scent.” That brought a bright blush to Will’s cheeks. “You should make use of the tub while the water’s hot, and then I have a proposition for you.”

Will had bathed in nothing but swamp water for an obscene stretch, and the prospects of a hot bath already had his skin warming with sympathy. But he cast uncertain eyes toward Hannibal, who continued to sip his wine languorously. There’d not been occasion in his life to be shy of stripping in front of anyone, so what he felt now was brand new. Though, he remembered with a deeper blush, Hannibal had been close to naked that morning with Will and had not been uncomfortable. Will had certainly been uncomfortable, but Hannibal had not been ashamed. He decided it would be best to make no fuss of it. And he certainly was not about to refuse a bath because he was afraid to take his clothes off in front of a stranger. Will stood with purpose and wasted no time in unburdening himself of his shirt.

Of course, Hannibal turned politely around in his chair at that point. He would not mortify the boy by watching him undress.

Will stifled his sigh of relief. His pants were shed next, followed by his underclothes. And as quickly as he could, Will slipped into the steaming tub.

Hannibal let the initial splashing subside before he turned back in his chair. For a moment he could not see Will, but then his head emerged from the water. The boy combed the hair from his face and smiled. It was a lovely thing to witness, and Hannibal felt content as he drank his wine and watched the boy scrub at his scalp. Was this what he had been seeking?

“What’s your proposition?” Will asked him, arms resting on the tub’s rim.

Hannibal set down his wine and steepled his hands beneath his chin. The idea had been fermenting in his mind for mere minutes, but already it seemed the best chance at snaring his boon. “I would like to take you to Novigrad to see a friend of mine.”

“I didn’t think witchers had friends,” Will replied snappily as he sank lower in the water.

Hannibal’s eye twitched. “Think of her as a colleague then.”

Will raised his eyebrows. “Why would I want to meet your colleague when I don’t even want to have met you?”

The older man tilted his head, causing strands of hair to fall in his eyes. “Because she’s a sorceress, and I think she can help you.”

The water that slopped over the edge of the tub could not be helped when Will sat straight up in the bath.

Hannibal took this as an exhibit of interest and continued. “I suspect your condition has ties to an otherworldliness, and that with study and practice it could be controlled or eliminated altogether. I would have you meet my – colleague – and learn from her.”

It was not what Will had expected to hear. He had never considered what happened to him to be fixable. But now that the thought had been fed to him, the taste was strong in his mouth. Could he trust this man as far as Novigrad? He'd not let go of his plan to slip away that night, though the loss of the bed would wound him. He could sneak away with a full stomach and clean skin, not to mention the leather coin pouch Hannibal had given him to hold. He could run, slip back to the swamps, hide, sneak, fester.

Could he abide the witcher for a while longer? Could he let the man take him to Novigrad? Could his sorceress have real solutions for him? He could learn from her and then escape Hannibal. If Will could control his condition, more opportunities opened to him. He would be able to lose Hannibal in a city. And Will would be able to make a life of some kind, amongst people. He fleetingly sought Hannibal. The man sat serenely in his chair like it was a throne, but the hair sweeping across his brow made the squint of his eyes seem playful.

Will could abide Hannibal's presence as far as Novigrad.

"Am I to travel as your apprentice on this excursion?" Will asked. "Could you hand me a towel please?"

Hannibal instantly rose to oblige him. "Yes to both."

Will accepted the witcher's answer and towel. Then Hannibal turned around, because Will was standing and stepping out of the tub.

"I would like to meet your friend," Hannibal heard the boy say at his back.

"Colleague," the man corrected. "I'm going downstairs to see about Winston. Check my pack while I'm gone. Its contents are yours." Without a backward glance at the towel-wrapped young man, Hannibal strode from the room, leaving Will alone.

He toed his dirty clothes on the floor as he passed and went for the pack that sat open on the bed. When his hand reached inside, it was met with soft, fresh cloth. Hannibal had given him clothes.

The sun beamed against the sleeping boy's face until he stirred. Legs stretched long under the blankets. He rolled to his side on the hay-stuffed mattress and yawned indulgently into the downy pillow. His hair had dried as he slept and now fell in lovely disarray about his face, the pale yellow light of the morning shining in his chestnut curls. Hannibal thought he looked like a beautiful, wild thing as he watched him wake from his place by the window.

The witcher had insisted Will sleep in the bed. He had taken the night to meditate, his own brand of rest, and now he waited patiently for his drowsy companion to meet the day.

In the end, it was the feeling of being watched that finally made Will open his eyes. He squinted at the sun and sat up, unsurprised to find Hannibal fixing him with a contemplative stare.

“Good morning, Will,” he said.

Will surmised the man had enjoyed his own bath after he had gone to sleep. What a deep sleep it must have been to not hear the maid with her buckets! But it must have been so. Hannibal’s hair was loose and clean and fell to lightly brush his collarbone. It was fine hair, an odd mixing of colors that made it difficult for Will to pinpoint a specific shade. If someone asked him what color hair the witcher had, Will would be hard-pressed to describe it without waxing poetic by sheer necessity. Ashen blond, with deep tones of silver, dappled in honey-hued light.

But everything about the man was a maze to Will, from something as simple as pigment to as complex as thought. What bolstered Will’s curiosity the most was his inability to read Hannibal. He had paid it no mind the day before when there had been a kind of shock-induced mist clinging to him, shielding him to the fact that he was blind to the witcher’s emotions. Then the event had happened in the tavern, and when Will had returned to himself he had seen Hannibal soothing him, but he had not felt him.

Nor could he feel him now, as Hannibal sat on his knees by the window, bare-skinned still from his bathing the night before, watching him with that strangely striking face.

Will ran a hand through his own hair, dark brown curls snaring his fingers. “Did you sleep on the floor?” he asked. It was possible, he supposed, that Hannibal had taken his bath and then joined Will on the bed. The idea burned hot in Will’s imagination, and he cursed himself inwardly for the blush he knew spread over his skin.

“No,” Hannibal informed Will. He stood from his kneeling position and reached his arms high over his head in a cat-like stretch that made Will avert his eyes. “If you’re agreeable to the idea, I would like to dress and leave this wretched place.”

The boy raised his eyebrows and turned back to Hannibal with a sideways smile. “I’m agreeable to a hasty departure,” he said.

“Then hasten to bring me my armor, and we can be off.”

“I imagine you were capable of dressing yourself until you met me,” scoffed Will. But he gathered up Hannibal’s armor, folded neatly on a side table, and brought it to him. He felt the material shifting against his own skin and it reminded him. “You did not have to buy me clothes,” he said.

The satchel had contained pants of softened leather, brown, and a variety of clean linen shirts. Will wore a white one now. Both pants and shirt fit him well, but Will’s favorite part about them was that they were clean and new. For once, he was overtly aware he smelled good and looked good. And that awareness made him a tad uncomfortable as he laced Hannibal’s hardened leather chest armor into place.

“Consider the clothes a gift to myself,” Hannibal said, holding out his arms for Will to fasten his gauntlets. “When next we’re seen together people will know you are my apprentice.”

“As opposed to a fisherman’s whelp you dragged from the swamp?” offered Will.

“Quite,” responded Hannibal coolly.

When he was dressed, he turned. Will took up his string of thin leather and pulled Hannibal’s hair back from his face. He examined it at this closer distance and found its shade was still impossible to pinpoint. But he tied it back as he had before, and cleared his throat when he had finished. Hannibal strapped his swords to his back, two swords, Will noticed in wonder, and they hastened from the wretched place.

They met no trouble in their exit. The innkeeper muttered his well wishes as he polished the spoons, and the rest of the tavern was empty. Will was thankful for that, and for the relatively empty road on their way out of town. The less people they encountered, the less chance for Will’s mind to spark painfully. He breathed much easier when he was back in Winston’s saddle and her clip-clopping hooves led them further and further away. He felt safe, which was a stupid thing to feel with a witcher at his back.

By midday, the sun was high, the sky was a glittering blue, and Will’s backside made him want to weep, it was so horribly tender. Hannibal must have felt him shifting around in the saddle, trying to find a position that didn’t bring tears of discomfort to his eyes, because he clicked for Winston to stop and dismounted. Will gritted his teeth as he lifted himself out of the saddle, accepting Hannibal’s offered hand when he jumped down. He brushed him quickly off, however, opting to rub both hands over his bum in silent agony.

“It will not always hurt so much, Will,” was all Hannibal offered as comfort. But he did extend their lunch break longer than he’d intended.

The day passed relatively unhindered. Will asked Hannibal how long it would take to reach Novigrad, what it was like. Hannibal explained other bits of magic he knew and spoke of Novigrad’s extensive bookshops. Besides the physical ache from riding Winston, Will felt pleased. To be out of the swamp’s shadows and riding horseback in the sunshine, with clean clothes, on the way to meet a sorceress to cure his mind’s malady. It was liberating and romantic. At certain points of the day, he could almost forget the witcher was there, but then Hannibal would adjust Winston’s reins and brush against Will’s side or he would sigh and make Will’s hair flutter against his ear, and the illusion of solitude would be shattered. Even so, his mood was light. Until it suddenly wasn’t.

As though they had passed through a great thunderhead, Will found himself dowsed with a heavy, grey feeling. He cocked his head in question.

“Are we coming upon a village?” he asked Hannibal, who was quick to assure him that no, they were taking an alternate route to avoid the nearest village. Will pressed the heel of his hand against his eyes. It felt like he was moving through wet sand, and a taste of bile was creeping in the back of his throat.

“You’re sure?” he asked Hannibal again, shaking his head briskly to clear a fallen curl that tickled his nose.

“What are you experiencing, Will?” the man returned, at once tugging on Winston’s reins for her to stop. They were alone on the road; Hannibal had been sure to take the longer route that twisted away from the villages. But he could see over Will’s shoulder the tremor in his hands, and he could feel against his chest the shallow breaths shaking his frame.

It felt different from his episodes before. In the tavern, he had been assaulted by a living mass of energies and thoughts. What grabbed at Will now felt visceral, oily and thick in the crevices of his brain.
The air he sucked into his lungs pricked him like razor-edged ice. His skin writhed as if made of maggots.

Hannibal held the shaking boy sturdily in his arms. “Breathe, Will. Can you explain to me what you are feeling?” Will pitched forward, gagging. Only Hannibal’s steadfast grip kept him from falling.

A bead of cold sweat carved a path down the bridge of Will’s nose. “Something is wrong,” he forced out between ragged breaths. “I feel – rotting. They’re broken.” Will scratched at his own arms, drawing blood, and Hannibal held his arms down to his side.

“Stay here with me, Will,” Hannibal commanded to the groaning boy in his arms. “Can you feel where they are broken? Can you point to them?”

The words drifted over Will, and like a compulsion, his unsteady hand lifted and pointed east. Hannibal’s mouth quirked with interest, for Will pointed in the direction of the village he had tried to sidestep. “People live that way,” he told Will in a hushed voice.

“No one lives that way,” said Will.

Hannibal placed a cool palm against Will’s forehead, and brushed back his disheveled hair. His witcher’s medallion abruptly began to buzz against his skin. Curious. “Will, I must ride to them,” he said. “I might be able to help.”

Hannibal urged Winston to a canter, and didn’t hear Will’s whispered response, swallowed by the wind. “No one can help.”

They were upon the village in ten minute’s time. Will’s harsh breathing had lulled him into a trance-like state, and he said nothing as Winston treaded lightly on the frozen ground. Every house, every post, every blade of grass was entombed in frost. It was like they had stepped into winter. But most disturbing was the stillness, especially as the ground was littered with bodies.

Winston snorted her disapproval and Hannibal slipped carefully from her back, mindful to keep Will balanced in the saddle. The motion jostled the boy from his stupor, and bright blue eyes cracked open.

“I would like for you to stay with Winston, Will,” Hannibal told him.

Will's breathing was growing more regular, but his mind still trudged through molasses. He shook his head at the witcher, then at the bodies sprawled on the ground behind him. "Oh," he said, and then he held his arms out, like a child. Hannibal could not refuse him, pulling him into his arms to set safely on the ground, but he appraised Will warily.

"I don't feel it as strongly now," Will said. He was shivering but unwavering on his feet. "Because they are more dead now than they were before."

"You have a gruesome and miraculous gift," said Hannibal. "To give it up completely would truly be a shame."

A woman, sliced in two through her abdomen, stared blankly at the sky.

"One man's treasure is another man's trash," answered Will.

"You felt the despair of these people from miles away, an impressive feat by any means." The witcher spoke casually, but he was searching all the while, pacing in a circle round the center of the village where the bulk of bodies were slain. His medallion was still vibrating.

"I felt death's icy scythe," Will mused. Every breath was easier now. As the energy dissipated from the bodies, their presence ceased to crush his mind, or so he gathered, his mind his greatest mystery.
"It is an odd thing, to feel relief in a field of the dead."

"It is not an odd thing to feel relief in a mind at peace," countered Hannibal. He had their scent now, the lingering few. "I wonder, Will, if you can get back in the saddle without my aid."

"If you ever let me attempt it on my own, you would already have your answer," said Will.

"All the same," Hannibal said, reaching to his back, "I would like for you to try it now."

Will was huffing in annoyance when the hounds shot from the tree line, and Hannibal drew his silver sword. Will might have yelled had he not been so surprised. Luckily, he was not too shocked to move, and when he turned, Winston was already there, bowing her head. He placed his foot in the stirrup, heaved, and plopped himself down in the saddle, hard.

Hannibal had time to flash Will a smile before the first hellish hound bore down upon him.

From atop Winston's back, Will watched in awe as Hannibal flourished his sword with the same grace and precision he flourished his words. He moved impossibly fast, striking one hound down and spinning to meet the next, all in a heartbeat. Will was mesmerized. A roll, a kick, a grunt, blood.

It did not look like violence. It looked like art. And before it had begun, it was over.

"What were those things?" Will asked, his startled voice pitching high.

Hannibal wiped the gore from his sword on the ground before re-sheathing it. "I believe they were Hounds of the Hunt. Filthy creatures."

Will spared a glance at the pile of fresh canine carnage. Hounds, despite their size, could not have killed everyone in the village. “Hounds don’t make a habit of cutting people in half,” observed Will.

Hannibal nodded his agreement as he approached Winston. “You are absolutely right,” he said, swinging himself up and settling behind Will. “The Wild Hunt was here. This is precisely why we must leave right now. Hold on.”

Winston tossed her head and charged down the road in a gallop, carrying Hannibal and Will away from the frozen village, headed straight for Novigrad.

Chapter 3

“You realize, of course, that I can’t actually go to Novigrad,” Will said a few days later as the sun was setting and the city lay in perfect black silhouette against the blood-red sky. The man standing beside him on the hill tightened his leather glove and Will delivered him his finest arched eyebrow. “Unless you aim to hex me and throw me over your shoulder again.”

Two days had passed quickly and strangely for Will. After their encounter with the hounds, they had ridden steadily for Novigrad, riding all day, with little breaks between. Will’s backside was sure to be calloused irreparably by the end of it all. But besides the basic unpleasantries, the time shared between Will, Hannibal, and Winston, had been unspeakably… fine. Traveling horseback made for difficult conversation, but the silence was welcome. By day, Will could wander in the recesses of his mind to daydream of his freedom, his healing, and by night Hannibal cooked them meals over a fire. Sometimes they spoke, but sometimes Hannibal would sit in the warmth of the firelight, polishing his swords and Will would sit on the other side of the fire and watch. Then Will would sleep and Hannibal would do whatever it was he did when Will slept, and in the morning they would set off again.

As he stood, eyebrow raised, challenging Hannibal on the hill overlooking Novigrad, Will disbelieved he had still been in the swamp with his father not five days before. He cherished the crisp air pulled between his teeth. His time with the witcher had proven novel, but its end was in sight. Somewhere in the city was a sorceress with possible answers for Will. He would miss Winston, he supposed, when he left.

“I aim for no such thing, I assure you, Will,” replied Hannibal. His angular face encouraged dramatic shadows that hid his eyes save for their golden yellow gleam. They seemed to twinkle in the dark.

“Unless you have decided that is your wish.”

“It would give my backside a break,” Will said easily, and Hannibal might have smiled, but Will could never be sure.

“All you ever need do is say the word,” the witcher said softly. “As it is, I have arranged for you to be quite unneeded in the city itself.”

Will could not deny the sting of disappointment at Hannibal’s utterance. “All my life I’ve heard whispers of Novigrad,” he said, sounding glummer than he’d meant.

“Perhaps one day soon you will be able to hear those whispers for yourself,” Hannibal told him as if reading his mind. Before Will could respond with a smart comment, Hannibal pointed to a gathering of lights at the bottom of the hill. “At times the soul desires more than mere whispers, and our bodies can be nourished by more than food alone. Do you enjoy music?”

“In the swamp, I enjoyed the time of night when the crickets sang. A chorus to carry away my busy mind. Or drown out the inhuman sounds my father made when he…overindulged.”

Will shrugged, embarrassed. It was his best answer.

“Melody finds a way,” Hannibal said as he nodded his approval. “The lights below belong to a troupe of players.”

“How can you tell?” Will asked dubiously, squinting and still seeing no more than shadow in the nightfall.

“I happen to know this particular troupe, or rather, their lead playwright,” Hannibal explained. “How would you feel if I suggested we join them?”

The young man shut his eyes and reached to touch tendrils with the minds of the players below. “They feel happy. And intoxicated.”

“Their feelings don’t concern me, yours do,” Hannibal said. The twang of a lute being tuned echoed in the air between them as Will considered.

“I feel…fear that I would have another episode,” Will replied honestly. He patted Winston’s mane, who stood beside him chewing a sugar cube. “I feel unstable. But mostly, I feel curious about something.”

Hannibal cocked his head. “What makes you curious?”

“You,” was Will’s fast reply. He wetted his lips with the tip of his tongue and took a step toward Hannibal. It had grown so dark he could barely see him. “And whether or not you will refrain from using your calming hex on me if I tell you I want to see the players.”

“I promise not to use my calming hex on you, Will,” answered Hannibal. “And I always keep my promises.”

It was a small troupe, no more than ten players, and they were spread out around a bonfire. If Will kept his head down, kept his distance, it might be fine. These people weren’t filled with hostility like the tavern crowd, they were filled with mead and cheer. Will would be fine.

The fire roared and crackled its enthusiasm as Hannibal entered its light with Will and Winston at his side. Though he kept a quarter of his senses at all times tuned to Will, his main focus at the moment was on spotting a tall, brunette poet. He found him filling up two mugs from a barrel. The sveltely cut poet spun on his heels and sauntered in Hannibal’s direction, a smug grin on his pretty face.

“Is that who I think it is?” the man said with a lovely, ringing voice as he stopped in front of them. Will shuffled back a step and focused on his breathing. Steady. He could feel the man, but not offensively. Hannibal grazed Will’s shoulder and the unexpected touch jolted him, but then the hand was gone.

“Hello, Dimmond,” said Hannibal in his elegant lilt. “It seems fortune favors me tonight.”

The poet called Dimmond threw his head back with a laugh. “Indeed! Though I am the one made fortunate, my friend. It has been too long.” He put a hand on Hannibal’s shoulder in what felt like a familiar gesture to Will, who was staring now at the two men, dumbfounded. Dimmond broke his friendly clutch on Hannibal’s shoulder and hit Will with a sweltering gaze. “The last time I saw you, your entourage was decidedly less breathtaking.” He was speaking to Hannibal, but his attention remained plastered to Will. “Wait, no, you had no entourage last time I saw you. Or any time I saw you ever. What’s the occasion?”

“Will,” Hannibal began, his eyes reflecting the flicker of flame, “allow me to introduce Dimmond, the poet.”

“You may have read my work. It’s very popular.” He winked at Will.

“He hasn’t,” Hannibal cut in playfully. “Dimmond, Will is my apprentice.”

Will was lost in a dream wherein Hannibal was charming and had friends who were handsome poets and they joked together and winked at Will. It was unnerving.

While Will stood awkwardly, body angling away from Dimmond, head bowed so his hair fell over his eyes, Dimmond himself was feigning dismay, clutching a theatrical hand to his heart in a swoon.

“Hannibal has taken on an apprentice! The world’s prickliest warrior with a heart of stone and abs of steel has chosen companionship over brooding solitude? Where is my quill? I must compose a sonnet for the boy who melted the statue!”

Hannibal shook his head in mock disapproval, and then turned his attention back to Will, scouting out his eyes from the curls that obscured them. “One thing at a time, I think,” Hannibal said. “Shall we begin with the task at hand?” He nodded to the mugs Dimmond held, earning a hearty laugh and bow from the poet.

“Take my drink, take my heart, take me,” Dimmond exclaimed, holding the mugs of mead aloft.

Hannibal took them both with a smile, and held one out for Will. “Take my drink, take my heart,” he said, voice deeply serious. But Will saw the crinkle at the corners of his eyes, and the quirk of his upper lip, and he returned his own hidden smile as he accepted the mug.

“Join me by the fire, my attractive friends, and tell me what brings you to the bowels of humanity,” the poet insisted with the good sense to lead Hannibal by the elbow and leave Will untouched. The witcher leaned in to murmur in Winston’s ear, and she whinnied before wandering off to have her fill of grass.

Dimmond led Hannibal, and as a result Will, who trailed behind him, to a stretch of smooth log in a favorable position by the fire. Will sat, head down to study the stone base of the fire pit, and Hannibal settled right beside him, bringing a nervous stir to Will’s stomach. Dimmond remained standing before them, the center of attention, which Will was certain was purposeful placement, and the other players, for the moment, busied themselves on the other side of the fire. The occasional strumming of strings, the tinkling of bells as they continued to

tune, reverberated over the crackling fire. Excluding the breath that hitched when Hannibal brushed against his side, Will remained majorly unbothered. As long as the players kept their distance, as long as the jovial troupe remained unblemished by violent thoughts, Will might find the evening of relative company survivable.

Hannibal clinked his mug against Will's, prompting them both to partake. It was difficult for the witcher to take his eyes off the boy when Dimmond resumed his speech.

"I know you're no fan of the ordinary, Hannibal, and what can be more ordinary than the droll lot of humans in Novigrad? Are you here for a contract, then? Something slimy slithering around Oxenfurt? Something nasty got its claws in the under-city? Or are you here to see a certain someone?"

"Will and I are here to obtain supplies, new armor for him, especially," Hannibal told Dimmond. For whatever reason, the witcher seemed to be avoiding a full account of their plan to his poet, so Will remained quiet beside him. "It would not be unwelcome, however," Hannibal continued casually, "to catch up with an old friend while I am here."

Dimmond's tall frame stood against the flaming bonfire, which loaned an air of menace as his next words dipped low. "If it is Alana you seek, I fear you have come calling at the worst possible time. It is…unfashionable, as of late, to be special in Novigrad."

"Alana is an undoubtedly special woman," Hannibal said. "Are you telling me she isn't here?"

"Would that I was," Dimmond replied wistfully. "Word is she's still in the city, but she's in hiding."

At that, Hannibal scoffed. "Whom would Alana hide from, besides you after too much mulled wine?"

"Why, the witch hunters, of course," said Dimmond. He kneeled down at this point, balanced with a hand on his knee, to meet Hannibal with an eye-level smirk. "They have spread like a plague through the city, with Verger leading their reeking ranks."

The witcher hissed his disgust. "Mason Verger?" Hannibal had crossed paths with the man before when Novigrad had required a witcher's skills. He was the son of one of the wealthiest families in the Northern Realms and a screaming racist, and Hannibal disliked him greatly. If he had run of the city, it meant trouble for everyone, not just non-humans.

"The one and only, thank goodness, for the world would surely crumble if there were two of that monster," the poet wisped. "He's been rounding up as many sorceresses as his hunters can get their filthy hands on, and burning them alive in the city square. It's a dangerous place for magic wielders. You should consider having your boy's armor made elsewhere, Hannibal."

Will listened with rapt attention to the man's warning, but Hannibal seemed none too concerned as he took a sip of mead. "Do you know where Alana is in the city?" he asked after a healthful swallow.

Dimmond smiled like a cat and waved his hands over his chest in a crisscross. “No, and I don’t wish to know. I am trying my best to stay out of Verger’s grip, and I suggest you do the same.” He waved vaguely behind him to the members of his troupe. Hannibal’s discernible ear concluded they were almost finished with the tuning of their instruments. Someone began a driving rhythm on a drum. “Three of us are elves, Hannibal. That alone has earned us a taste of Verger’s ire. You know I’d like to help you, but my desire to keep my skin is slightly stronger.”

Hannibal laughed and, to Will’s surprise, finished his mead, so Will tipped back his own mug and downed its contents. When he lowered it from his lips, Dimmond and Hannibal both were watching him with amusement.

“That’s more than enough talking, I think,” Dimmond said, taking the empty mugs and springing to his velvet-booted feet. “I’d much rather be drinking. Join me, fellows, if you’ve the mind.” He was off with a smile and a spin, to rejoin his troupe and refill the mugs from the mead barrel.

Alone again, Will turned to the man sitting beside him on the log. His head felt fuzzy, but he knew it was only a normal fuzziness from the mead he’d finished so quickly. It felt nice, but it did not distract him from his foremost concern. “Is Alana the sorceress you wanted me to meet?” he asked.

Hannibal tipped his head, and a thin strand of grey fell into his eyes. He tucked the hair thoughtfully behind his ear. “Yes.”

“You will be able to find her, even in hiding, won’t you, Hannibal?” Will asked, feeling positive he was correct even before the witcher nodded his answer.

“You will meet your sorceress, Will. I promise,” Hannibal assured the boy as he rose from the log. “But to quote the world famous poet, ‘That’s more than enough talking, I think.’” He held his hand out to Will as a flute joined the beating drums.

Will was glued to his seat, staring at the offered hand with suspicion. Across the flames of the bonfire, he spied the dancing figures of the troupe as the music began to swell. Dimmond’s laughter could be heard over the clapping of hands and stomping of feet. Will shut his eyes to better feel their atmosphere, and a playful yearning touched his mind, an alcohol-spritzed, pink mist. He felt no meanness in these people at the moment, only an eagerness to move, to live, to be.

When he allowed his eyes to open, the hand was still held out to him, waiting. He took it and let himself be led around the fire where a full mug was thrust into his hands and the music surrounded him, a loud, demanding force.

Dimmond smiled at Will, raising his drink to the heavens in a grand toast. “To beautiful apprentices,” he said, and Will was thankful for the veil of night as he hid his face in his own mug. He only realized he’d still been holding Hannibal’s hand when the man gently pulled it away. Will sought to drown his embarrassment as he drank deeply.

The flute twirled its notes invitingly, and as the witcher stood enjoying the tune, Dimmond swept an elven woman from her feet into a dance, and as they flitted past Will, the woman's dainty foot kicked out behind her by silly reflex, and the boy was knocked forward.

Will felt the stun of physical contact from the elf, her mind, to him, like being dipped in warm water, and then she had sashayed away, and he was left to contend with the fact that he had been thrown into Hannibal's arms.

The witcher let his mug thud against the packed dirt, and caught the boy with preternatural finesse. Will tipped his head back to thank him, dark hair falling, big eyes wide and reflective, and Hannibal, a slave to his whimsy, took firmer hold of the boy before his lips tugged into a small smile, and he led them into a dance.

Will's high-pitched squeal of astonishment was blessedly hidden by the rising music as the witcher guided him in circles, holding his hands to push him away only to pull him back again for another spin. Too full of mead to protest, Will could not stop the laughter that tore from his lips as he was led round and round by the older man. It was happening too fast to stop, so he didn't even try. He only laughed and laughed and let Hannibal lift him, clap, lift him again, the music never ceasing, but increasing, faster, and faster, until Will's head was spinning wonderfully and the pink mist of the troupe was his own, and he was fine. Everything was fine, and he could breathe, and he felt free as strong hands clasped his waist and dipped him and swirled him.

They danced until Will thought he might fall to his knees, and Hannibal made up the bedrolls while Will swayed on his feet, whispering sweet things to Winston. He was still floating in the pretty pink mist when Hannibal laid him down and covered him with blankets. The melody of the troupe still played in the back of his mind, a faint accompaniment to Hannibal's 'goodnight,' and when Will finally slipped into sleep he dreamt he was being lifted up to the heavens by strong, rough hands.

After Will nearly collapsed from exhaustion in his arms, Hannibal hurried him to bed, and he watched him sleeping now as he sat with Dimmond. The hour was late and the humble group of players were either tinkering with their lute strings or dozing around the fire.

"Where oh where did you find him?" the poet asked the silver-haired man sitting poised on the dirt. Nearby, Will rolled beneath his blankets and made sweet, sleepy noises.

"Would you believe me if I told you I found him in a swamp?"

"No, I would not," Dimmond declared. "The boy is a princeling. You have kidnapped him from his royal bed, of that I am certain, and you will not convince me otherwise. And you want to disgrace his beauty by making him a witcher and banging him up with terrible scars. It is a crime," he said. "I have half a mind to call the witch hunters after you and steal him for myself. He would be a sensation on the stage with a face like that. It's like staring into the sun to look at him. I can hardly bear it."

Hannibal held his tongue while Dimmond threatened to make the boy his muse, frowning in jest at the overzealous man. When he had finally spoken himself weary and settled on featuring Will in both his next epic poem and love sonnet, the witcher broached his anticipated topic.

“Your ear is oft to the ground, Dimmond,” he began. “Has word reached you of any unusual sightings?”

“It depends on how you define ‘unusual’,” Dimmond said as he fiddled with the scarf twisted around his neck to ward off the night’s chill. “A year ago I would have said a pile stacked high with burnt corpses was an unusual sighting, but now it rolls off my back like rosewater.” He cleared his throat as if to expel the image from his mind. “You showing up with an apprentice in tow is unusual.”

And it was unusual, Hannibal admitted. For countless years he had travelled with his silver and steel, always alone, always content to be alone. But something gripped him now, as it had on the night in the swamp when he’d first met the boy’s electric blue gaze like a shock. As quickly as that, he had cast aside his disdain for companionship. With a look something had changed. He looked at him now, eyes fluttering in dreams, lips parted, and cheeks rosy from the fire. Hannibal nursed the cluster of uneasy sensations that balled in his chest, and reluctantly looked away from the curl-laden sunshine.

It was difficult, looking away.

It was unusual.

“I have huge faith in him. He will be a capable witcher,” Hannibal finally said.

“That delicate thing?” said Dimmond incredulously. “Could he even pick up a sword?”

“I have no doubts in the array of Will’s capabilities. I believe his untapped potential is vast,” answered Hannibal. “I also harbor no doubts that we happened upon victims of the Wild Hunt on our road to Novigrad.”

Dimmond brought a hand to his heart, stricken. “You jest.”

“Then my news is the first of it you’ve heard?”

“I would remember news of the Wild Hunt being sighted, Hannibal.”

The witcher moved a strand of hair, broken free of its leather binding, from where it kissed his brow. “We came across a village blanketed in frost. They left behind bodies and hounds.”

“Unfathomable. You know, they say their leader hunts for his mate as he prowls across the sky, the cavalry of death in his wake.”

“I believe it was the poet Dimmond who said that,” replied Hannibal, straight-faced.

The poet pointed an accusatory finger at the witcher with a grin of triumph. “I knew you read my work.” A slyness came over him suddenly, and he said, “You know, if I were looking for

a mate, I'd be hard pressed to find one more pleasing than the boy you've been glued to all evening."

"Then it is a good thing you don't ride with the Wild Hunt, or I'd be short an apprentice," was Hannibal's reply, and the men shared a pipe as the remaining embers of the fire died.

Hannibal wasted no time in the morning ushering Will to a shop which stood apart from the houses in the little village outside Novigrad proper. It was a tailor, he'd informed Will, tossing him an apple for breakfast.

"I have more than enough clothes now," Will reminded the man. He tugged at one of the new shirts self-consciously. "I would rather you not buy me any more."

Hannibal was knocking on the shop door. "You need to be fitted for armor."

Will crossed his arms stubbornly and said, "I won't need armor if I won't be fighting."

The witcher smoothed the trim scruff of beard along his jaw, and made a mental note to visit the barber when he was in the city. "Do you believe you will always be in control of such things?" He knocked again. "Would your opposition of violence have protected you against the hounds?"

The boy remained silent. He had been moody since waking, his mind felt raw. In the light of day, he looked back upon the night with contempt. The dancing, the drinking, the music. Will had been swept up in the drunken frivolity of the players and made a fool. He had danced with Hannibal and enjoyed it. So now, he took special care to avoid any physical contact, and looked anxiously toward the future of the day, when he would meet the sorceress, and then leave the damned witcher behind. He would have to find a new apprentice, because the very idea of strapping on a sword brought acid to Will's mouth. And to be a plaything for Hannibal to dance around like a prize and dress up like a doll was to be better off dead.

Hannibal sighed, his only outward sign of discontent. "Indulge me."

"Why?" Will quipped bitterly.

"Because while you are being fitted for armor, I will be scouring the city for our missing sorceress," said Hannibal, knowing the remark would earn him Will's reluctant acquiescence.

The door opened just as Will was puffing up his chest indignantly, and a man of medium height clasped his hands together and gave them a squinty once-over before yelling over his shoulder, "Put on your pants, Brian, we have customers!"

Will could see a tall, dark haired man putting his hands on his hips in the background. He was shaking his head, fully clothed.

The man at the door moved aside and waved them in. "It's Hannibal, so put on your better pants."

“I’m a tailor, all my pants are my better pants,” the man named Brian said as he joined his partner’s side. “Hello, Hannibal.”

“Brian, Jimmy” Hannibal greeted them. “This is Will, my apprentice. He would benefit greatly from your armor and armaments.” The witcher stole a glance at the boy, then added, “And a hem in his shirts, I think. I prefer the style to be more finished, but what can you do when you’re forced to buy from a village merchant?”

He knew Will must be seething behind him, and it pulled a sliver of a smile from Hannibal’s lips. Jimmy, the man who had opened the door, appraised Will quickly, head tilted, eyes still squinty and hovering.

“I see what you mean,” Jimmy said. He looked up at Brian and said, “We could go a bit snugger around the middle. He has those broad, erm -- ”

“ – shoulders,” finished Brian, nodding his head with enthusiasm. “We could bring it up in the back, sleek up the silhouette.”

“And fit him in a vest of that tan leather we just got in, to compliment those pants. They fit pretty well, but don’t you think -- ”

“ – Yes, they could be tighter.”

Will listened to the volley in horror. Hannibal, however, found he was quite pleased with the plans. After a few minute’s back and forth, and a pouch of coin passed discreetly from one man to another, Hannibal placed a hand on Will’s shoulder. It was shrugged off immediately, but it caught his attention, and big blue eyes met his for the first time that day.

“Will,” he said. “How are you feeling?”

The question surprised Will, and he blinked thoughtlessly for a spell before clearing his throat and lowering his eyes. The insistence of Hannibal’s golden stare was making him uneasy, the eyes he had looked into the night before as he’d been lifted and spun.

“Will?” the witcher pressed, not unkindly.

In truth, besides a lingering resentment of the man in front of him, and a shame in himself for his breezy behavior the night before, Will felt fine. The tailors were inoffensive, and their minds seem to be tethered so closely with one another, they hardly encroached on Will’s at all.

But to the witcher, with an irritated twinge, he said, “I’ll feel better when you leave.”

A muscle in Hannibal’s cheek twitched, but the boy was not looking, and missed it. “How timely, as I am leaving.” He spoke a few hushed words to the tailors, and then headed for the door. “Be good, Will,” he said, and then he left.

Hannibal knew exactly where he would find Alana.

He strolled the city streets with Winston; though it was easier to travel unhindered by a horse, it was ultimately wiser to keep one of Will's possible escape plans out of reach while Hannibal completed his errand.

The path to St. Gregory's Bridge was gruesome. He had to pass through the pit of the town where the air was rancid and its inhabitants were poor and filthy and desperate. This was the path he was forced to take until he reached the bridge that would ultimately lead him to the literal high society of Novigrad. But before he reached the bridge, he reached the square, which was packed full with traders and merchants and their customers. And witch hunters.

Hannibal, his sense of smell always keen even before he'd undergone witcher mutations, had recognized the scent before he had seen it. It was a familiar smell to him, instantly recognizable, imprinted on his brain to never forget and always know.

Human flesh melting. Hair burning.

An onlooker's excited sweat.

It seemed he had arrived just in time for one of Mason Verger's witch burnings.

Hannibal was tall enough he didn't have to strain to see over the multitude of fascinated heads, and he had a clear view of the stake, and the woman strapped to it. He would not describe the sounds she made as screams, but he closed his eyes to listen as the conflagration cloaked her whole, and then her noises, screams or other, stopped completely. A few members of the crowd cheered at that time, but most kept their voices down. By the time they began to disperse, Hannibal had already continued on his way.

He climbed the sloping bridge, and on the other side the streets were cleaner, the air smelled sweeter, and the sky may have been bluer, but Hannibal spared no time to check. He only had eyes for the elaborate establishment overlooking the fine cobbled street. As he passed its courtyard's ornate fountain, he dipped his fingers into the cold water. Then he found the entrance and made his way inside the Passiflora, Novigrad's classiest whorehouse.

The downstairs was decorated in deep, lush reds. A bartender busied himself to Hannibal's left, and a low-key band strummed a lulling ditty to his right. If it hadn't been for the ample display of decadent flesh, Hannibal might have thought himself in a decent establishment. A smooth, tan hand was just reaching out to caress the witcher when she was intercepted by a tall, doe-eyed woman who wore her frown as well as she wore her stilettos. Hannibal smiled, happy to see her. But the woman raised her eyebrows nonchalantly and kept her frown secured on her lovely round face.

Not mutual, then.

"Hello, Margot," said Hannibal, bowing his head to her slightly. "How's the family?"

Another girl approached Hannibal, and Margot set her gently walking in the opposite direction. She sighed and tossed her long, golden brown hair over her shoulder. "If by family, you mean Mason, then I'm sure he's just great. There was a witch burning queued up for

today, and nothing gets him going quite like good old fashioned torture. Except maybe young torture."

"I saw it on my trek to you," the witcher said. "Your brother revels in hurting those weaker than him. Are witches weak, Margot?"

She crossed her arms. "My brother has been called on by a higher power to do holy work. This means now he revels in hurting those weaker than him and those different from him."

"You're different, Margot," Hannibal smirked. "When was the last time Mason hurt you?"

"Luckily, Mason doesn't pay many visits to the Passiflora," she said. "I don't stock his particular tastes." When a third employee, an attractive blond man slinked up to Hannibal's side, Margot rolled her eyes and shooed him away. "I'm sorry," she said, "did you like that one? Should I call for him to come back? I assume you're here as a paying customer."

"What other reason would I have for calling on you, Margot?" the witcher asked, his eyes aglow with inference.

"I see," she said. "Why don't you join me in my office and we can discuss a payment plan." Without waiting to see if he followed, Margot turned on her high-heels and stalked away. Hannibal followed her green tea scent across the crimson carpet and through the richly carved door of what could only have been her office. When he'd shut the door, she poured them both a whiskey and sat down in an oversized leather chair, gesturing for him to sit across from her. Once both were settled with a crystal glass balanced on their knees, Margot spoke first. "You're not here to take me up on my monster contract, are you?"

Hannibal clicked his tongue disapprovingly. "Your brother Mason does not count as a monster. It would be morally wrong for me to take that contract, Margot."

She sneered into her whiskey. "A witcher in moral dignity pants?"

"I'd much rather talk about your pants, Margot, and who is getting into them," said Hannibal.

Margot bit at her lower lip as she swirled the dark amber in her glass.

"Is she here?" Hannibal asked. He knew she was, but he was striving for politeness.

"I'm not sure I know what you mean," Margot replied in her dreamy cadence.

Hannibal set an arm over the back of the chair and crossed his legs. He made a mental note to polish his boots. After the barber, perhaps. It was by the bookshop, and he could buy something for Will. "Are we going to play games, Margot?" he said, snapping his attention away from thoughts of Will, for a moment, at least.

She sighed heavily and finished her drink in one swig. "I know better than to play games with you, Hannibal," she said. "Walk out of this office, find the young man with the curly brown hair and leather collar, and ask him for the pleasure of his company." She stood and straightened her clothes. "Now kindly remove yourself from my office."

“Thank you for your hospitality, Margot,” Hannibal said.

The young man with the curly brown hair and leather collar was on the Passiflora’s second level, feeding himself grapes from the vine as he sprawled across a purple velvet settee. Naturally Hannibal placed his physical attributes as being altogether similar and dissimilar to Will. This boy’s curls, for example, were dull where Will’s were burnished. This boy was pale where Will was porcelain. This boy was thin where Will was elegantly slight. So similar, so different.

When the collared youth spotted Hannibal approaching, he shifted on his settee to make room. The witcher slid down to join him on the overly-soft cushions.

“Hey,” the young man said with heavy-lidded eyes. Green and not blue. “You’re a witcher, aren’t you?”

Hannibal nodded and allowed his knee to be grazed in meandering circles.

“I like that,” the boy said. “You must be really strong. Do you like my collar?”

Hannibal did, in fact, like the collar. He touched it, tracing it with careful fingers before taking a hold of it, not roughly, but with the firm promise of roughness. “I’d like the pleasure of your company,” he near-whispered. The young man grinned at him, and it was nothing like staring at the sun.

Hannibal was taken by the hand and led to the end of a long hallway where there was a small step-up and then another hallway. When at last they reached a wall length mirror, the boy checked over his shoulder, winked at Hannibal, and then knocked against the mirror, two little raps against the antique glass.

“I’d like the pleasure of your company, too, for the record,” the young man told Hannibal as the mirror began to slide open, and then Hannibal was entering the passage and the collared man was out of mind, out of sight. In sight was a woman with deep brown waves cascading over her shoulders and an inquisitive expression painted upon her pretty face.

“Hello, Alana.”

Chapter 4

Will stared at his reflection in Jimmy and Brian's looking glass. He wore the clothes Hannibal had given him, the brown leather pants and white linen shirt, but now layered snugly atop was a leather vest, hardened. His clothes clung closer to Will than before their adjustments, but he didn't mind overly much, still appeased by the knowledge he was wearing new, clean clothes. Brian had tried to coerce Will into tying his sword sheath into place, but Will remained adamant that no, thank you, he wouldn't be needing a sword.

He was unaccustomed to seeing his reflection in anything other than the surface of a swamp, and he looked different than he remembered. He looked older, his skin paler, his eyes wilder, hair miraculously clean. In clothes that fit. He hardly recognized himself.

He didn't recognize at all the woman who entered the shop that next moment. She was short-ish, thirty-ish, and dark haired, pretty. He looked at her in the mirror. She must have seen him then, because she focused on him and smiled

"Will?" she asked him. He nodded, still not turning around from the mirror. She echoed strongly in him, and it made his heart race. He was thankful Jimmy and Brian were with another customer in the back, or else Will might not have been able to fight the overwhelming essence of the woman approaching him. "My name is Alana. I'm a friend of Hannibal's," she said, stepping close enough to touch. And she did touch. She reached a hand up to Will's shoulder, making him shudder from the contact of body and mind, and turned him around to face her. Her hand did not drop, but tightened its grip, only slightly, but it made Will's knees wobble. "Hannibal told me a bit about your condition. What you're feeling now is strong, because I'm a sorceress."

Will nodded, unable to think of words as Alana's being vibrated around him.

"I want you to listen to my voice," she said softly, sliding her hand from his shoulder at last, though it did nothing to ease the affront to Will's mind. The sorceress's stamp wasn't violent, wicked, or hateful, but it was more power contained in a single individual than Will had ever sensed, and it stung.

"Close your eyes," she said, "and focus on the sound of my voice. Your name is Will Graham, it's noonday, you're in Novigrad."

Will took a big, straining breath, eyes closed tight.

"You can feel me in your mind. I don't want you to run from it, Will. I want you to meet it. Try."

He reached a testing tendril of mind to brush Alana's, and jumped when he found himself flush against it. She felt like blue vapor.

"Now focus, Will, and push me back. Just push against the feeling," her voice chimed.

It was similar to when he had reached out to Dimmond, opened himself up to him in order to keep him at bay. As though in order to resist someone's mind overtaking his own, he had to allow them in first. He breathed in Alana's blue, commanding vapors.

"Push," she whispered, and he did. His mind became something solid and Alana's mental groping slid against it, but not through it, as Will raised his wall and began to push, slowly, but forcibly. No longer was her essence a consuming presence, but an undertone, something he could sense but not feel as his own.

"That's it, Will," Alana praised. "Open your eyes."

He felt her retreating into herself, felt his breathing return to normal, and looked at her. Alana's smile was all white teeth and dimples. Will felt her in the room like a modest hum.

"I haven't introduced myself," Will grumbled weakly when he could speak again. "But someone has already introduced you to me, it seems."

The sorceress palmed his shoulder again, and he recoiled and then relaxed beneath her touch. The contact was easier to withstand with his wall standing strong in his mind.

"Our mutual friend enjoys controlling even simple things, like introductions," she said pointedly. "I'm glad for it on this occasion. You have a rare gift, Will."

"That's what he said," Will scoffed. "It doesn't feel like a gift when I can't even trust my own head."

"The fact that you've survived this long with no training or explanations is incredible," she said. "And with the right instruction, you could learn to control it. Hannibal told me you lose control in large crowds."

He nodded.

"I can teach you to block people out, hone in on others. You could manage the crowds, Will."

This was what he had wanted to hear, and it was simple. He was already improved, with his wall erect and solid. With just this simple trick he could escape. With the wall he could enter small villages and make a living as a fisherman. He wouldn't have uncontrollable episodes, wouldn't be run out of town like his father had been all those times before. It could be a life.

He smiled at Alana, a toothy and mischievous force of nature. "Thank you, Alana."

He heard Jimmy and Brian shuffling in the back room before they re-entered the front of the shop, their hands full of fabrics. Their newest customer sauntered in behind them.

"Be still my heart, if it isn't the apprentice," said the man, finely groomed eyebrows lifting high.

"Dimmond," Will said with a nod.

The poet probed at Will's mental wall, but it only proved to be a mild irritant and was not an overwhelming sensation in the least.

"Hannibal had mentioned the tailor's shop last night, and it reminded me of how much mending my wardrobe needed. Were not my cuffs atrocious, Jimmy?"

Jimmy agreed that they were atrocious, indeed, and Brian added that velvet was no easy material to clean. Certain stains, Jimmy had smirked, were harder to work out than others.

When the witcher entered the shop, it was to a full company of acquaintances. Dimmond was turning in the center of the room like a show pony, while Jimmy and Brian buzzed about him like bees with scissors and clothes pins. Watching from the chairs against the far wall was Alana, and standing, leaning against the wall was Will. Hannibal treated himself to a lingering look.

The boy had been fitted with the finery his body deserved, and he cut a svelte figure in his hardened leather gear. The attire, and the defiance in those eyes as he glared at Hannibal from across the room, filled the witcher with light. This was a boy he could train. This was a boy who could take up a sword and plunge it into the heart of a monster.

But Will's was not the only outward appearance to undergo a transformation that day. Hannibal had sent Alana ahead, opting to stay in Novigrad for a few choice stops. His face was smooth from a fresh, close shave, drawing full attention to his attractively bowed mouth. His cheekbones, already high and sharp, seemed ever more so now. His hair he had left long, because he enjoyed keeping it braided back, or rather, he would miss the tug of Will's fingers through it in the mornings when he pulled it into a tail.

The boy heeded the witcher's bare face with masked interest.

"There's the witcher I recognize!" Dimmond remarked with a cocky grin. "You almost look as dapper as me now."

Hannibal bowed his head to the poet, but it was to Alana he next spoke. "How did you find my apprentice?"

The sorceress threw a smile at Will. Then she addressed the room casually, wise enough not to mention Will's oddities of the mind in mixed company. "Almost too old to be your apprentice, for one."

The witcher cocked his head, then met Will with a questioning eye. "How old are you, Will?"

The boy looked away from Hannibal to his boot laces. "I'll be nineteen this year."

Hannibal's eyes narrowed, and he hummed thoughtfully. "I suppose you will be." To Alana, he said, "Not too old, I think."

"Most witcher's apprentices begin training as children, Hannibal," she countered. "The trials are easier to withstand."

Will did not want to hear about trials and training, because it did not, would not concern him. He had decided. He would leave by nightfall that day. It made the banter easier to take in the small shop, knowing that.

“Will is superior to other apprentices,” Hannibal replied simply.

Dimmond watched the exchange with interest.

Alana was standing with a hand on her hip now, sternness in the way she creased her brow. “Will,” she said, turning to speak to him directly, “it’s my opinion you may be happier in another profession. Something more…academic.” Something more to do with his powers of mind, he knew she meant.

Dimmond offered his two cents next, of course, not wanting to miss out on the suggestions. “Will, my beautiful muse,” he waxed, earning a rolled eye from everyone in the room, “cast aside these trappings of blade and dust. You belong in the glow of a spotlight, not swimming in books and blood.”

“And you’ll belong at another tailor if you keep flailing your arms about like that,” Jimmy scolded. “I nearly stabbed you twice now with my pin. One of those times would have been an accident.”

“I believe Will has presence enough to choose his own path,” Hannibal said.

Will did not respond, focusing instead on his mental wall, feeling the competing energies of the room battering against it. Hannibal watched him paling, and took a step back to the front door. “A word, Will?”

He followed the witcher to the outside of the shop, his urge to breathe fresh air greater than his urge to avoid Hannibal’s nearness. When the door shut and they were alone on the sunny street, Will took a deep breath, enforcing his wall. Though Hannibal’s mind, as he’d noticed before, was silent. Again he wondered if it was because he was a witcher, master of his emotion. Will wished vaguely for the ability to feel Hannibal, if just a little, to gauge his intent.

But the man stood mysteriously before him, and Will was left to guess how he felt when he placed a small bundle into Will’s hand.

“No one told me there would be a gift exchange,” Will muttered uncomfortably as he thumbed the surprising weight.

“I took something from you in the swamp, and it would be unforgivably discourteous of me not to replace it,” Hannibal said.

A harsh laugh escaped from Will, and he said, “You took my freedom. Is that what this is supposed to be?” He thrust the bundle back at Hannibal, but the man did not accept it. “Take it.”

Hannibal's face was blank, but his hands were proof of his disappointment when they grasped Will's. With both hands snared, the bundle fell between them to the ground, a small knife bouncing from the folds of cloth.

"If you continue to refuse a sword, I would at least have you carry a knife," the witcher said, his voice deeper than usual. "If I recall, you're already semi-adept at close-quarter combat."

Will's eyes were wide, staring at the sharp metal and bone-white handle of Hannibal's offering. He ached to pick it up, to rescue it from the dirty ground, but his hands were still in Hannibal's, not kept prisoner in his grip, Will could have pulled his hands away, but he hesitated.

They stood that way, hands interlocked over the blade, unmoving, until Hannibal brushed his thumb experimentally over Will's wrist. The boy's face burned red-hot, and he yanked his hands free. Hannibal reached for the knife as Will did, and their hands met again over the handle.

The witcher retracted his touch first this time, allowing Will to grip the knife and turn it over in his hands with care.

"You're not worried," Will began, wondering why he sounded breathless, "that I'll try to stab you again?"

"No," replied Hannibal.

Will shuffled his feet, hair falling into his eyes, deciding whether or not he should say thank you. In the end, he didn't get the chance, because Hannibal was opening the door to the shop and their spell of heavy silence was broken. "I must return with Alana to Novigrad this evening, Will," he said. "Brian and Jimmy would love to have you for dinner, if you'd be so kind as to wait for me here. I shall return before you sleep."

Will shrugged his shoulders and followed Hannibal inside, tucking the sheathed knife into his back pocket. He found himself surprised by his luck, suddenly armed and facing a Hannibal-free evening. It was as if the universe was finally aligning in his favor. Be free, it whispered to him on the wind. He watched the witcher speak to Alana with their heads close together, wondering idly if his own head had been so close when they'd stood over the knife, and it struck him that he would not see him again.

As Hannibal and Alana walked past Will to the open door, Will's hand shot out on its own accord to catch Hannibal's forearm. He could feel the heat through his clothes, like he could feel his own heat spreading over his cheeks. Hannibal tilted his head, but said nothing.

Will opened his mouth to say thank you. Thank you for the knife and the clothes and the food. But the words refused to come, and Will pulled his hand away as if he couldn't stand to touch him, letting Hannibal turn and leave. He tried one last time to guess at the man's hair color as he watched the witcher stride away with Alana into the afternoon sun. Silver and blonde and soot. And then he was disappeared into the streets of Novigrad.

Will waited. He sat politely in the corner as the two tailors helped customers. Dimmond had left shortly after Hannibal, winking at Will on his way out. After an hour or so of waiting, Will found himself alone in the room. Brian and Jimmy were sewing and bickering in the back, and no customers waited for assistance.

It was time.

He stepped with light feet from the shop and turned his face to the sun, which was beginning to sink lower into the sky. A loud snuff drew his attention to Winston, who was chomping some grass by the road. Will wondered why Hannibal had left her behind this time, but he was glad for it. He patted her neck fondly, leaned close to her sable ear and whispered, "Goodbye." She nuzzled his hand, and Will turned swiftly from her and began his descent into the fields.

He walked quickly, and he did not look back. He was making good time. There was a tree line in his sight. If he could make it there, he could lose himself in the woods. The sun told Will that Hannibal would not be back for some time yet. He could make himself irretrievable in that time. Step after step after step, Will moved further away from the witcher's clutch. He refused to look back.

Until someone said his name.

Will whipped around in the tall grass of the field. The someone was Dimmond, and he was standing at an unsettling distance.

"Have you been following me?" Will asked him, angry.

"I thought you might fancy some company," the man said with a smirk.

"I don't fancy it, actually. Quite the opposite."

"Overwhelming, isn't it?" Dimmond asked, venturing closer. For his one step forward, Will took one step back.

"No," Will said. His mind swept along its wall, still sturdy, but he could feel Dimmond on the other side, nails scraping at his barriers. It felt different from the night before. Now something other than alcohol clouded Dimmond's mind.

"I know your secret," the poet said, taking another step.

"I have no secrets," Will said, stepping back. A panic began to flood his mind that had nothing to do with being overwhelmed by Dimmond's emotions. The feeling of dread was all Will's own as Dimmond closed the distance between them like a fox, clasping Will's wrists to still him.

"You would be good on the stage," Dimmond purred into Will's ear. "You're an excellent liar. But I heard your talk with the sorceress, princeling."

Will tried to twist out of Dimmond's grip, but the taller man's hold was unshakable. "I don't know what you think you heard, but--"

“I think I heard a month’s worth of gold for my troupe.” He frowned as Will kicked at his shin. “That’s how much the witcher hunters will give me for you. That’s not including what they’ll give me for Alana.”

“You two-faced whoreson,” Will spat. “You can’t do that!”

“I can’t, but the group of witch hunters I’ve tipped off certainly can. They’re already scouring the city for her,” Dimmond laughed. He yanked Will flush against him. “You, I can handle.”

A burst of adrenaline coursed through Will as he felt Dimmond’s body pushing against his own, and with a crack that set them both to screaming, Will head-butted the poet.

“Gah!” he yelled as he fell to his back.

Will held his palm to his forehead. Usually when his head ached, it was from the inside. He was surprised to find the physical pain not nearly as bad. But in an instant, Dimmond was jumping back up to his feet and lunging for Will. Nails dug into flesh as the two men struggled, falling into the veil of the grass.

They clamored for dominance in the field, as the sun began to set, Dimmond’s hands twisting into Will’s hair, prying him up from the ground to drag. Will could not be dragged into the city. His freedom was too near to lose to a spindly poet with a greedy soul. Fingers closed around a smooth handle of bone, and in a flash of movement, Hannibal’s gift was lodged into Dimmond’s throat.

Will was released as Dimmond’s hands flew to his neck, eyes bulging in surprise at the knife. Will looked him dead in the eyes and pulled the knife free. Blood sprayed, staining the blades of grass and spattering on Will’s clean new shirt. Both men shook, Dimmond on the ground as he bled out, and Will as he watched him slowly die.

He let the knife fall free after Dimmond had exhaled his lungs’ last breath. And then he began to walk once again. Not for the tree line, not for his freedom. But for the damned city of Novigrad. He had to warn Alana.

Hannibal had seen Alana safely back to the Passiflora, as he had promised Margot. He sat with them both in the room behind the mirror, nursing a whiskey.

“He’s a fast study, Hannibal. You should have seen how quickly he was able to push me out of his head,” Alana was saying. She was sitting comfortably beside her wife, and they passed a pipe to share between them. “I’m not sure I’ve seen anything like it before. I’d like to take it up with the Lodge.”

Hannibal grimaced. Of course the Lodge of Sorceresses would be interested in Will. “They will not have him,” he said.

Alana sighed. “Unlike witchers, the lodge does not kidnap anyone and force them to train against their will. It would be entirely up to him.” She held up her hand when Hannibal began

to speak. “There is magic in him, Hannibal, powerful magic, and I don’t know what it is or what it means, but it should be studied. It could be dangerous.”

“Especially in this city,” Margot added as she blew a ring of smoke to drift over their heads.

“Margot and I are working on a plan to get as many non-humans and magic-wielders out of Novigrad as we can,” continued Alana. “The Lodge will be meeting at our holding in the north shortly after that.”

“That’s near Kaer Morhen,” said Hannibal.

“It is. And I know that’s where you’re planning to take Will for training,” Alana said. “But ask him, Hannibal. I taught him the smallest amount of control today, but there’s so much more he could know about himself if you brought him to us.”

The witcher thought there was much more Will could learn about himself from him, but for the sake of ending the conversation at hand, Hannibal said, “It will be a consideration.”

He excused himself shortly after.

Now he found himself lingering. His eyes drifted across the red room to a purple velvet settee, a young man draped languidly across it. It was not the same, but it would do.

Will busted through the front door of the tailor shop.

“Where was Hannibal going with Alana?” he practically yelled at Brian, who was stitching up what Will knew to be one of Hannibal’s shirts.

The tailor shrugged, bewildered, but Jimmy hurried into the room and said, “The Passiflora. Why?”

“Three guesses why,” said Brian.

“Where’s the Passi-whats-it?” asked Will desperately.

“Take St. Gregory’s Bridge, you can’t miss it,” said Jimmy. “But Hannibal told us to keep an eye out for you while--”

But Will had fled from the shop already. His feet stopped as he passed Winston, who stood looking at him, chewing. He experienced only a sliver of hesitation before pulling himself into her saddle.

“Let’s go,” he said, and Winston took to a solid canter. Will held his breath as they passed through the gates and into the city.

Hannibal spent the majority of his time alone. As a consequence, he was rarely touched. And after an especially long period of time with no physical contact, and then sudden trickles of touch over the past few days, the witcher found himself compromised.

The curly haired man straddling him was called Aiden, and he liked it when Hannibal pulled on his leather collar.

Hannibal liked it when Aiden didn't speak and faced away from him, so he could run his hands through his hair. But it wasn't the same.

Will was at a standstill with his brain as he moved with Winston through the city. He tried to remember Alana's voice telling him to be calm. So far, his wall remained, and as long as he had his wall up, the swell of people would crash against it, but leave him untouched.

Get to the bridge, get to the bridge, get to the bridge. It was his mantra and his tunnel vision. He saw nothing else as he tromped through the crowds, not the ash-black stake that remained erect in the center of town, nor the charred remains of the human melted to it.

He was so entranced, when he did finally reach St. Gregory's Bridge, he hardly realized it. It wasn't until Winston had climbed the entirety of the sloping bridge, that Will took note of his suddenly posh surroundings. He jerked his head wildly about him, curls flying from his face. There was a massive structure with a fountain outside in a courtyard. A gilded sign hung over its entryway.

The Passiflora.

Will galloped Winston, pulling her to a halt only when he'd reached the front door. Then he slid from the saddle, stumbling as his feet hit the ground, and ran into the building.

It was a testament to his focus that it took him so long to realize he was, in fact, inside a whorehouse.

It couldn't be the right place, but he couldn't very well ask anyone if they knew where Alana was when she was in hiding and being actively sought by the witch hunters. So instead, he waved down the nearest skin-clad woman he saw, and asked her, panting from his exertion, "Have you seen a man named Hannibal here?"

He expected her to look confused and shake her head, that no, she had no idea what he was talking about, and he better ask someone else. He did not expect her to smile at him and nod her head toward the stairs. He did not expect her to say, "Yeah, sweetie. He's making someone's dreams come true. If you hurry you could probably join them."

He did not expect that, of all things, to be what brought down his wall with a thunderous clap.

"Oh, sweetie, are you alright?" he could barely make out the woman asking him. "Do you need some wat--"

Her voice faded away from him, and then her face, and Will was blind and deaf in a storm of surging emotions. A city of people, a whole city, fighting their way inside Will's head. He didn't know he was running out the door, he didn't hear himself screaming in pain, or feel himself knock into a man on the street before collapsing to his knees in convulsions.

When someone cried for the guards, Will was incoherent, a mewling mess on the cobblestones. He didn't feel himself being handled by gruff hands, or the rope being tied over his neck. He didn't know he was screaming Hannibal's name when he was hit in the head with a sword hilt and dragged, unconscious, through the street.

Hannibal was pulling on his gloves when Alana slammed open the door and stormed into the room, sending Aiden flying under the sheets in fright.

"They have him, Hannibal," she said, her voice thick with the threat of tears.

The witcher stood from the bed. "What?"

"The witch hunters have taken Will."

Chapter 5

“What, what, what?”

“We got a witcher at the gates, says he’s got someone with him you might be interested in seeing.”

“A witcher, did you say? Hmmm. Who does this witcher have that would interest me?”

“He’s got Alana Bloom, sir. What do you think? Should we let him in?”

“What do I think? What do I think? I think that witcher should already be standing here in front of me. I think I should already have Alana in chains.”

“Yes, Master Verger, right away.”

The guard scurried from the room, Mason’s barking laughter echoing behind.

Minutes later two wary witch hunters entered, their swords drawn and fists tight, eyes glued to the witcher that stalked in front of them. Hannibal’s face was pure indifference as he took an unoffered seat in the chair across from Mason’s desk.

“Hannibal,” the bespectacled man trilled. “I thought it might be you, but I didn’t dare get my hopes up.”

“Good evening, Mason,” the witcher said, tone cool and even.

Mason released another barking laugh. “I’ll say!” His pale blue eyes peeked over his glasses and he plastered Hannibal with a sickly smile. “I’ve been dying for a taste of that witch.”

Hannibal folded his hands in his lap and returned Mason’s smile. “Margot won’t be pleased.”

“Margot will be angry with me. Don’t you love how feisty she gets?” Mason tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair. “Don’t mind me, Hannibal,” he began when he caught Hannibal watching. “Apparently I’m fidgety tonight, but it’s been a busy, eventful day. A fun day, and I’m anxious to get back to playing.”

“Then allow me to suggest we settle our business so you can resume to your evening as usual,” said Hannibal graciously.

“Oh, but it’s not a usual evening at all,” Mason said, crossing an ankle over his knee to let his slippered foot hang shaking. “Aren’t you close to Alana?”

Hannibal gestured vaguely before him. “Even witchers must pay their tailors, Mason,” he said.

“Oh, I love it! Friend betrays friend, witcher betrays witch,” Mason said in a sing-song. “You’re so funny, Hannibal. I really love it when you come to see me. Let me pay you for the

sorceress. She'll keep me busy long after I'm done with my newest addition."

"I would be grateful for any payment you are kind enough to provide," Hannibal told the swine across from him. Deep in the witcher's chest, something was pacing violently.

"That's what I like about you. You're courteous, Hannibal," Mason said just as a scream rang out from the next room. "I hope that won't bother you. I told them to get started on Alana without me. Prep her, if you will."

Hannibal listened to Alana's throaty screams of pain utterly unruffled. "It doesn't bother me," he said, and it didn't. It had been Alana's idea, after all. Another scream.

"I told them to remove her fingernails however they wanted," Mason explained animatedly over another scream. "It sounds like they figured something out, doesn't it?"

It wasn't a difficult thing for Hannibal to do, sit and listen to Alana being tortured. He presented Mason with the perfect picture of nonchalance while he said, "Tell me, does the newest addition you mentioned make such beautiful noise?"

Alana's next scream was muffled by Mason's excited response. "That's the rub, Hannibal, and I'm so thankful you brought it up, because it's so rude to bring these things up oneself," he rattled on, stopping to adjust the glasses balanced on the end of his piggish nose. "This new one hardly makes any noise at all, but his non-vocal responses are luscious. I could eat him up, really. If he were a few years younger it really would have been a good, fun day." Mason's hair was spiked up in manic disarray, blonde pieces wobbling with every erratic movement of his head. "Say, Hannibal, maybe you can help me. Help me, and then I'll pay you."

"How could I turn down such an offer?" asked Hannibal, and Mason clapped his hands gleefully.

Then Alana's howls of pain seemed to shake the walls, followed by a heavy thump. "She finally fainted. Took her longer than it usually does, naughty girl," said Mason. "But enough about her. Cordell!"

A guard Hannibal had passed on his way into the room popped his head in, and asked, "Yes, Master Verger?"

"Cordell," Mason began, "fetch me my boy."

"Right away," Cordell said, and vanished back behind the door.

By the time Mason had poured Hannibal his glass of wine, the door swung back open. Through it walked Cordell. Being pulled by Cordell from a chain around his neck was Will.

If one had been watching closely, they might have noticed the miniscule yet uncontrollable flaring of the witcher's nostrils, or the twitch of his lip, as the boy was led into the room, his chain handed off to Mason, still sitting at his desk. But no one watched Hannibal closely in that moment. All eyes were on the boy, naked and bruised and beautiful, who stood wavering

on his feet, hands bound behind his back. His lip was bleeding, and a trail of red dripped down his chin and stained the skin of his smooth chest. His head was down and he breathed in quick puffs of air.

“Thank you, Cordell. That will be all,” Mason said with a wave of dismissal, and then he stood, chain in hand, and turned to the witcher. “Isn’t he delectable, Hannibal?” Will’s head shot up at the mention of Hannibal’s name, but Mason didn’t notice an oddity in the timing. “I could get lost in those eyes, but I think I’d rather pluck them out. What do you think?”

Hannibal looked at Will. Blue eyes burned him, and he glanced away, casually. “I think I’ve seen a million others like this one, Mason.”

“Have you? I think he’s special,” Mason said, his hands slowly winding the chain so Will was forced to stagger toward him. “For example,” he said, bringing back his hand, “he doesn’t make a damn sound.” And then he brought his backhand down across Will’s face, hard enough to knock him to his knees, which choked him with the chain until he was yanked back to his feet again.

Mason’s laugh was maniacal and constant. Will looked up at Hannibal through sweat-damp hair, blue eyes blazing, and the tension kept buried deep in Hannibal’s chest erupted. The witcher narrowed his eyes, pupils like black daggers, and pulled free his steel sword.

“Whoa!” Mason yelled. “I did not expect that. It really has been an unusual day,” he said right before Hannibal ran him through with a brutal thrust of his blade. Mason Verger opened his mouth, as if to laugh, and blood spilled from his lips. The witcher pushed him off his sword point with his boot, and Mason’s body crumbled to the floor.

Hannibal paid no mind to Mason, re-sheathing his steel and rushing to Will, who was standing, shocked, holding his own chain.

“Will,” Hannibal said as he cupped the boy’s face in his hands. “Will, are you here with me?”

The boy’s eyes blurred in and out of focus, but he found Hannibal in a moment of clarity he would later forget, and asked, “Where else would I go?”

And then he half-collapsed against Hannibal. The witcher unwound the heavy chain from his neck, and cut the tie that bound his hands, and picked up the borderline unconscious, naked boy to carry in his arms.

A door opened and Alana stepped through, hands bloody. Hannibal glimpsed the body-ridden floor behind her and grinned.

They met each other in silence in the center of the room, then Alana opened a portal, and they stepped through together, Will held tight against Hannibal’s chest. A harsh blue light, and then they were standing in a forest, a cabin a few paces away with a quaint garden in front.

“I wish I could stay, Hannibal, but I have to get to the Passiflora,” Alana said hurriedly. Her eyes were stormy. “Meet with us at the Lodge as soon as you’re able. That’s where we’ll go

when we've left Novigrad." She was already opening a second portal. "Take care of him," she said, and then she stepped through the doorway of light, and the portal winked out.

Will walked down a shaded path through the swamp. The air was thick and swirling, black and hard to inhale. Though his boots sank into the muddy earth, he could not feel the suctioning tug of each step. He could hear whispers, rustling the trees like the wind, but every time he strained to listen, he plunged further, deeper into the surrounding blackness of the swamp.

Then his eyes opened to the world with a flash of lucidity, and golden eyes were peering at him through tousled ashen strands.

He gasped and the gold blinked out. Will was back in the swamp, and he was sinking where he stood, his energy to lift his feet dwindling. The whispers rose to a deafening roar, an assault to his ears.
He threw his wrist over his eyes and groaned.

A flash and he was returned again from the black swamp. A cool hand rested against his forehead. Will fought to keep his eyes open, to stay in sight of the golden eyes and cool hand, but a shiver wrenched his body, and his eyes snapped shut.

He sank to his knees in the muck as the thunderous roar battered his eardrums. Only now he could understand. "Stay here with me, Will," the wind commanded. He felt a cold liquid slide down his throat, slink into the pit of his stomach and slosh as he squirmed against the ravenous mud.

"Will."

Hannibal was sitting on the bed with the boy's head in his lap. That's how they were when Will opened his finally-clear eyes, coughing and gasping for fresh air.

"It is safe now. Breathe," said the man, delicately brushing back the sweaty curls from Will's tear-stricken cheeks. He slipped from beneath the boy's head and knelt by the bed, taking up Will's wrist to test the pulse there, still pounding fast, but normalizing.

Will turned from his back to face the witcher, who watched him with rapt attention. "Alana," he tried, voice hoarse and rasping. "She was in danger."

"Alana is safe," Hannibal assured him. "It was you who was cause for concern, dear Will."

The endearment, slid in with subtlety, did not offend Will in his fragile state, but coaxed him to take Hannibal by the wrist and, clearing his throat of its dryness, begin again. "The witch hunters. Dimmond," he said, the last name tumbling from his lips in a whisper, hardly heard.

Hannibal knitted his pale brows and looked Will over, searchingly. "What of Dimmond, Will? Was he taken by Mason's men, as well?"

The boy turned ghostly pale and shook his head. “He’s – he knew, and he was grabbing me, and I -- ”

Hannibal was poised like a sculpture, kneeling in awe by his wide-eyed apprentice, waiting for the words he longed to hear.

Following a startled sound, as if Will had only just remembered, he said in a low, trembling voice, “I killed Dimmond.”

The witcher placed his hand over Will’s, the one that held Hannibal’s wrist, but the motion drew Will back into himself, and he yanked his hand away. To mask his disappointment at the loss of contact, Hannibal moved his rejected hand to his hair, smoothing it back. He was not surprised to find the expression on the boy’s face one of disgust.

“Dimmond was a creature of indulgence,” the witcher said. “If his life came down to a pivotal struggle between you and he, I am glad it was you who lived.”

A nasty idea swelled in Will’s mind, bone-white and blood-splattered. “Did you orchestrate my killing him, Hannibal?” he asked.

The older man beamed at the accusation. “Because I gave you the knife?”

“With the intention I use it for murder,” Will finished with clenched teeth.

“My only motive,” said Hannibal, “in giving you the knife, was to provide you with a means to defend yourself if the need arose.” He tilted his head and the light from the bedside candle danced across his sculpted jaw. “Did the need arise, Will?”

“If you’re asking if I killed in self-defense rather than flat out murder for murder’s sake,” began Will, his ire building, “then I’ll tell you this.” A shiver skitted across the skin of his scalp. “Dimmond is dead because of me. Nothing matters beyond that fact.”

“It matters to me, Will,” Hannibal offered. “It matters to me that you are alive because he is dead. I hope,” he said, daring to place his hand on the mattress, not on Will’s leg, but right beside it where it was layered under blankets, “that you will allow me the privilege of extending your knowledge of self defense, so if ever you are attacked by something more menacing than a flamboyant poet, I will have the comfort of knowing you will survive.”

“Dimmond is dead because he threatened a woman who dared to help me,” said Will tersely as he sat up in the bed, shifting to grate subconsciously against Hannibal’s hand. “I didn’t risk my life riding into the city so you could teach me how to better slaughter living things, witcher.” Will panted from the cruel exuberance of his speech. He remembered the moment in the whorehouse when the woman had gestured up the staircase, and fisted the blankets at his side. That’s when he realized Hannibal’s hand was resting so near to him, and he could have screamed from it. The possessiveness of a single, deliberately placed hand. He threw back the intolerable prison of blankets and fled from the bed. “I risked my life to help Alana. I want to learn from her. We aren’t alike, Hannibal. I have no appetite for death.”

Will refused to feel the rush of guilt that stung at his eyes. He denied it, just like he had denied the tingling sensation he'd felt upon killing Dimmond. He would never voice it, never give the feeling power of a name. Deny, refuse, lie. The look on Hannibal's face as he stared reverently up from his place on the floor stirred nothing in Will, nothing but contempt.

Deny, refuse, lie.

"If you have an appetite at all, it would be an excellent sign of your recovery," Hannibal said after a pregnant pause. He stood, finally, and walked to the stone-topped table in the kitchen nook of the cabin, where he had set out bread and cheese, and a pitcher of chilled well water. "Please help yourself after you've dressed. A few of your clothes are still in my pack."

Will was naked, he realized. A memory cut a scene through the film reel of his mind, and he saw himself in a dank dungeon, trussed up in chains as a spongy-faced man tore his newly tailored clothes from his body. He ran a hand over an angry blue bruise on his stomach and saw himself beaten and bare and bleeding.

He brought his head up in time to watch Hannibal stepping from the cabin with a glass of wine in his hands. He remembered being pulled into a room like a dog on a leash. He remembered Hannibal cutting down Mason and cutting his binding and pulling him into his arms.

He inhaled a sharp breath and watched Hannibal through the window, his figure standing straight and still as he waited, unobtrusively, for Will to dress. He felt a slight upset at his lost clothes as he pulled on a shirt, blue and soft. As he stepped into pants, a black pair that was too loose on his hips, he noticed his lack of filthiness. Hannibal had bathed him, then, and a minty salve slathered over his bruises informed him he had been mended by the witcher, as well. The cool liquid he had felt when his mind had been trapped in the swamp. Had it been a witcher's potion?

Will laced his pants with frustrated fingers still shaky with exhaustion. He was angry with the man for pulling him from his simple life in the swamp. He had been unloved and unwanted and unhappy, but he had known what was to come one day to the next. Now he had been dangled the chance of a better life, teased with a sorceress's secret knowledge, and he wanted it. Oh, how he wanted it.

Hannibal was enjoying the spicy undertones of his wine when the door of the cabin creaked open and Will slipped through it like a wraith. The witcher savored him in the darkness of night, when he could look freely upon him, unseen by Will's inferior vision. And what he saw presently was a resolved posture, set jaw, and squared shoulders. He also saw Will had helped himself to Hannibal's spare pants.

"Thank you for saving me from the witch hunters," the boy said.

Hannibal nodded and said, "You're welcome," but he knew that was not all Will wanted to say. Before the brunette could speak again, he added, "I wish to make you a second proposition." He admired Will for swallowing the sigh he obviously wanted to expel.

"Oh?" was all the boy asked.

“Alana informed me of a meeting of the Lodge. She has invited you to attend,” he explained. “It is to be held at their holdings, further north.”

“And your proposition is what exactly?”

“Allow me to escort you there safely,” Hannibal replied. “I have been there before. I know where it is.” He did not add that it was near his own Kaer Morhen, that he meant to take Will there instead, for training.

Will was frowning. “Alana said she could help me control my…particular brand of peculiarities. You would take me there?”

“I would like to ensure you remain unharmed on the journey. It would be a difficult road to traverse with only a carving knife with which to defend yourself.”

“I, uh – don’t have that knife anymore,” said Will, suddenly quiet.

“All the more reason for me to accompany you,” said Hannibal. “If you will have me. And Winston, of course.”

Will could have cursed himself for not inquiring before. He squinted into the darkness eagerly for the horse, but could not make head nor tail of her. “Where is she? I left her in Novigrad! I’m sorry!”

But Hannibal was laughing softly and walking to the end of the cabin garden. He pursed his lips together and a whistle sounded clear and melodious through the trees. Then the witcher headed back for the cabin door, turning to Will as he passed. “She’ll be along shortly.”

The boy was mystified, but content that Winston was safe and en route to their location. Another witcher thing, he supposed. He raked his fingers through his hair self-consciously; Hannibal was standing right there with a patient expression.

“So?” the witcher asked.

Will pretended to take a few seconds to think it over, but in truth he had made his decision instantly. After a show of shuffling his feet and looking up to the night sky, Will shrugged his shoulders, said “I accept your proposition,” and headed back into the warmth of the cabin, Hannibal following close behind with a long-toothed grin.

Their chosen path, despite a difference in opinion as to where exactly it was leading, took them northeast through spiraling, mountainous terrain. The journey was not overly long, but it was strenuous, and on the third day after their departure from the wood cabin, Hannibal took Will to a cave, announced they would be resting for the rest of the day, and set his swords and satchels on the stone ground.

Will had not expected the early respite, but he certainly wouldn’t turn away the opportunity to get the feeling back in his legs from so long in the saddle. The cave was cool and damp,

and an uninviting musk lingered in the air, but whatever the stench, it did not appear to bother Hannibal, for he was stretching his legs unconcernedly and wearing a distant look.

He expected, at that point, for Hannibal to begin a fire, for that was what Will had noticed to be his usual first step in making camp. But instead of casting Ignii over a gathering of sticks, the witcher rolled his shoulders and made a small sound of discomfort Will had never heard from him before. His inquiry was fueled entirely by curiosity, eons from concern, when he asked the witcher what was wrong.

“It is nothing,” Hannibal answered, waving off the question. “A tightness of the muscles. Nothing a pinch of mountain herb won’t cure.” He picked up his satchel and began for the mouth of the cave.

“You’re going?” Will asked the man with one leg in shadow and one in daylight.

“I spotted the medicinal flower I require for an ointment just down the path outside,” Hannibal said, securing the cloth pack over his shoulder. “I shan’t be long, Will.”

“Do you…need me to do anything while you’re gone?” Will asked. Since the cabin, the witcher had all but treated Will as an invalid. Helping him on and off Winston, setting up their camp, cooking. He’d even denied Will’s assistance when he had begun to help Hannibal dress in the mornings. He had gently pushed Will’s helping hands away and said, “You should conserve your strength.”

Will felt desperately useless. He had been weak after the Novigrad incident, as he had begun referring to it, but was in much improved condition now, wholly capable of tying a ponytail. So when Hannibal informed him there were no tasks to be done in his absence, Will’s jaw clicked with suppressed frustration.

As soon as the witcher made his exit, leading Winston away with him for a graze, Will began to pace. It had been a long three days. No, it had been a long…however many days since Hannibal had claimed Will as his boon. He wasn’t even sure anymore. The lines in his life were beginning to blur. It felt as if he had never been without him. He tried to picture his father’s surly face, scarlet with drink, and found it was a struggle. The minutes that passed now were the sole moments of solitude Will had experienced since he’d been left to hang in chains in the witch hunters’ dungeon. But unlike most of the times in Will’s life when he had been contentedly alone, now he stalked in busy circles over the slick stone, unsettled, almost as if there was nothing to do if he could not skulk around Hannibal or glower at him, or offer to refill his cup.

When at last he heard the footsteps of his return, Will had to bite his lip to contain his sigh.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” he asked, but when he looked up, the witcher was not there.

Will’s laugh at his mistake bounced off the cavern walls, and then was joined by a wet thud-thud, like boots in a puddle. He whipped his head around, but again it was not the witcher.

Cave noises, Will reasoned. And could it not have been so? Will had never spent time in caves. He was unaccustomed to most things that were not found in the Velen swamplands. Cave sounds of an unknown origin, Will deduced, must just be one of those things he had never heard about.

Another thing Will had never heard about was a creature, nay a monster, called a nekker. A nekker was much like a drowner, of which Will was familiar, but instead of hunting in the water, they tunneled and nested in large groups, surrounded their unaware prey and took them by surprise, attacking as a pack and ripping it to pieces with their claws and teeth. They were usually found in damp forest regions. But on occasion they could be found in certain caves. A single nekker was not terribly dangerous, but five could take down a seasoned witcher.

Will counted six.

First he yelled, "HANNIBAL!" which startled the grey-skinned monsters, but only for a moment before they were moving in a circle around Will, snarling and coming closer, closer. He gagged on the obscene stench that enveloped him, and hated that his nose would be filled with that particular smell when he was killed in that cave by a horde of monsters while his witcher escort was busy picking wildflowers.

"No," Will said as he turned in a panicked circle. The nekkers were closing in. They were close enough to count teeth. Granted, their teeth were huge and easily spotted from a greater distance. "No, no, no, no," he repeated. "Hannibal!" he bellowed at his highest manageable octave. The witcher would come back too late and find pieces of Will splattered on the cavern walls, and tilt his head, curious about the gruesome demise of his stupid, stupid apprentice, but then he would go on his way, and Will would be cave grime.

Will wished he had his knife as the nekkers growled around him, poised to strike. He wished he had his knife so he could at least have a chance at defending himself. He looked down, unable to face the nekkers that were feet away now, and something shimmering laid unsheathed at his feet.

"Oh!" yelled Will, and he moved faster than he ever had before, ducking low to sweep up Hannibal's silver sword at the same time the nekkers lunged for him with bared teeth.

He rolled between the jumping legs of one nekker, and then regained his footing and flew towards the mouth of the cave. But he was cut off from the world by a seventh creature, jumping from the darkness and landing directly in front of him. With a guttural howl, it swiped a great claw across Will's chest, shredding his shirt and making Will wish, hysterically, that he'd been wearing his leather vest. The blow sent him staggering back, where another nekker bit down on Will's shoulder.

He yelled and, swinging the silver sword with all his strength, spun out of the nekker's filthy maw and sliced through its stomach. Entrails slipped to the floor with a splat, but Will was in it now, his mind reaching out to greet the nekkers' savage signature. He felt them in his mind. But when Will jumped out of reach of a razor sharp claw seconds before the nekker had even raised its arm, Will realized he wasn't just feeling them, he was reading them. He sensed their actions before the act. He had never felt that before. It was entirely new. He stabbed at the

nekker that leapt to take hold of him before the nekker was able to leap. Blood streaked across his face and coated the silver sword.

The tingling sensation when he had killed Dimmond returned to Will as he plunged at another nekker, this one thinking about taking out his legs, and found that the silver cut through the monster's flesh like an oar through the water.

But despite this new development of apparent pre-cognizance, Will was still an untrained fisherman's whelp, surrounded and outnumbered, and all it took was a group effort to take him down. On a wicked silent agreement, the nekkers jumped him in unison, knocking Will to his back. The silver sword clattered to the ground, out of his reach, and he was finished.

Hannibal, however, was just getting started.

He stormed into the cave astride Winston, and her gallop scattered the nekkers. The witcher jumped from the mare's back, landing precisely over his silver sword, and he swept it up in a punishing arc that took out two nekkers about to get their teeth in the boy. They toppled on top of Will, who yelled and threw them off. Already he was covered from head to toe in blood.

There were three monsters left, and they were after Hannibal now. Will scooted frantically back as their battle commenced, finding cover behind Winston, who was avidly snorting and stomping her hooves, ready for a fight. He watched, eyes peeking over Winston's back, as Hannibal threw all three back at once with a wave of his hand. A sign shimmered and faded in the air. More witcher magic, Will knew, and he pondered the rune sign as he waited for the three nekkers to get back up to resume their attack. But they didn't.

"Are they dead?" Will asked, voiced muffled from behind the horse.

"Yes," said Hannibal.

Will came out from around Winston, walked right up to Hannibal, and wished for the nerve and stupidity to strike a witcher. That's what his father would have done, and that was cause enough for Will to stifle the desire, and instead say, "Wildflowers, Hannibal?"

The witcher wet his lips, and his eyes smiled. "I thought you may require something for the pain."

"You thought I might -- " Will stopped mid-sentence to close his eyes and breathe. When he spoke again, it was with a white-hot wrath. "You left me in a monster den to die!"

"I left you in a monster den to survive," the leather-clad man corrected. "How did you survive, Will?"

"With the weapon you left for me," Will fumed.

"And how did it feel to wield my weapon?" Hannibal asked, stepping closer, eyes trained to the blood drying on Will's chin.

“How do you think it felt?” countered the younger man, practically shaking from the cocktail of adrenaline, fury, and leftover fear.

“I could not say,” was the witcher’s reply as he knelt on the ground before Will to wipe the blood from his blade on a shred of cloth. A piece of Will’s ruined shirt, he realized with amusement. He stood again and slid the sword back in the sheath across his back. “I can only tell you how it made me feel being a witness to your…necessary violence.”

Will swallowed hard. “And how did it make you feel?”

“Privileged. To be in the presence of such raw magnificence,” Hannibal answered. The boy in front of him was flushed and smelled of cinnamon and copper.

“I feel betrayed by you,” Will whispered.

“That is understandable. You believed me to have abandoned you to your death. If it is any comfort, I was watching the entire time. You were entirely safe.”

“These cuts don’t feel safe.” The boy trailed a finger over the claw marks striping across his chest. It came away coated in blood.

“I would never leave you alone to die, Will,” Hannibal said.

“Yes, I’m sure you’d want to stick around and watch.”

“I would prefer teaching you to stay alive.”

“Fine.”

Hannibal was taken aback. “Fine, Will?”

The boy crossed his arms over his chest and winced. The blood soaking into his shirt was beginning to cake and flake, and some of it was his. He didn’t want any of it to be his again, he decided.

“Teach me,” he said to the witcher. “I should be dead ten times over. Teach me how to survive when you’re out picking flowers, Hannibal.”

“Dear Will,” the witcher said, pulling out his kerchief and dabbing softly at the blood smattered across the boy’s chin. He left a speck, dried and black, on his lower lip. “I will teach you as long as you let me.”

Chapter 6

Will reached out with his mind to touch Hannibal's, but as usual, the witcher's emotions could not be found. Thus it was impossible to predict his movements, and the swift hook of his foot around Will's ankle sent the boy crashing to his knees. A sword tip pressed to the hollow of his throat, but its owner was beaming down at Will with warmth.

"Do not rely solely on your mind, Will, though it is phenomenal," Hannibal praised and reprimanded in one breath. "You must learn to trust in the purely physical responses of your body, as well." The sword tip was removed, and Hannibal helped Will to his feet.

They had been sparring for the better part of an hour, and the moon was beginning to show itself. Only a day had come and gone since Will had faced the nekkers in the cave, and he had trained with Hannibal in the evening before they supped and bathed. They had done the same today, Hannibal correcting his grip on the sword, walking him through the proper footwork, and incessantly knocking him to his backside. Will was sweaty and sore, but as he waded into the mountain stream beside their makeshift camp for the night, he was also satisfied. He had found that the weight of the steel sword Hannibal had loaned him to train with made him feel balanced, almost like it took some of the weight off his mind.

Hannibal stripped and stepped into the water behind Will. They rinsed themselves clean of the day's efforts in comfortable silence.

When they had dried, Will dressed himself in his only remaining shirt that wasn't ripped or dirty, and then moved to stand behind Hannibal, who was stoking the campfire.

"I can never feel you," Will said, running his fingers through moon-blonde hair.

"And I can never predict you," responded Hannibal, passing the leather string over his shoulder for Will to take. He felt the boy gathering his hair at the nape of his neck, sending a rare heat to warm Hannibal's face as the string was tightened and tied. When Will had finished his task, he passed over Hannibal's shoulder a second leather string.

Hannibal's lips curved at the ends in a surprised smile when Will shifted to sit in front of Hannibal, back turned to him, dark curls dipping to the tops of his shoulders.

"If you could predict me," Will said with his face to the fire, "you wouldn't find me nearly as interesting." He felt hands graze the back of his neck and shivered.

That gift, that permission to touch, nearly froze Hannibal's hands, but when the boy pushed ever so slightly back into the witcher's touch, Hannibal responded, brushing his fingers through the silky hair to twist into a thick plait.

Kaer Morhen was close now. They would reach it in the morning if they kept on the path, if Hannibal didn't lead them instead slightly to the east where he knew the Lodge would be meeting. It was where Will thought they were headed. Hannibal tied off the braid with the

string, and was sorry when his hands had no more excuses to touch, and Will moved to sit beside him, further off.

Would it be such an expense, the man thought as he watched the firelight spread warmth across the boy's face, to take him to the Lodge? If he allowed him that freedom, would Will vanish into the night with the sorceresses or would he return, tethered still, to Hannibal? He didn't know, because Will was unpredictable. But he was also accurate when he had said that was what made him so interesting. And Hannibal was interested.

He wanted Will to choose him. But first he had to give him the choice.

They would not take the road to Kaer Morhen in the morning, Hannibal decided. They would continue on to the Lodge.

Will turned to Hannibal, then, and smiled. It was the last warm moment before the frost.

The logs of their fire crackled with ice, and Will's soft sound of surprise puffed from his mouth in a white cloud. "Hannibal?" he asked his companion, who had jumped to his feet and brandished his sword the moment the temperature dropped.

"Take my steel sword, Will, quickly," the witcher growled. Will hastened to obey, nearly dropping the sword in his hurry. When he was standing, Hannibal moved to his front, guarding, protective.

"What is it?" Will whispered, breath hot against Hannibal's neck.

"The Wild Hunt," Hannibal whispered back, and as if on cue the hounds began to howl. Hannibal felt the boy stiffen behind him. "Will, I want you to get to Winston, and ride as quickly as you can from here. Don't stop."

"No. I will stay," said Will, and Hannibal was turning to argue with him when the huge armored horses galloped into the clearing.

"Go, Will!" the witcher bellowed, pushing Will back toward Winston, who was stepping wildly and tossing her great black head.

Will's two days of training kept him from losing his footing, but he staggered back a few steps, sword still in hand. He thought of jumping on Winston and fleeing. He was almost to the sorceresses, he could make it, and leave the riders of the Hunt to take care of Hannibal. It was the escape he had been scheming. The witcher would most likely be killed, and Will would never have to worry about any of it again. He looked back at Winston, then at Hannibal, who was poised for defense, strange eyes narrowed and glowing, sword gleaming before him as he prowled, back and forth, in front of Will.

The riders in their bulking black armor reined their mounted beasts to a halt, and Will made his choice, stepping forward to stand once more at Hannibal's side. The witcher snarled at him, but his stare remained straight ahead, where a rider was dismounting from his horse. With heavy clomps in giant spiked boots, he began for the witcher and his apprentice. A helmet obscured his face, but when he spoke his words were loud and clear.

“I have been looking for you,” said the rider. “But you have been hard to find.”

Hannibal stepped in front of Will, sword raised high. “Here I am,” he said. “Do what you will with me, but allow the boy to remain unharmed.”

“It is not you I hunt, witcher,” replied the rider. He lifted his own sword and pointed it at Will. “I could feel you calling me,” he said.

Will shook his head. “No,” he murmured into Hannibal’s back. “I didn’t.” He delved into his mind, grasped frantically for the rider before him, and gasped when he felt it: burning ice and death, what he had felt that day in the village. He pushed the rider’s twisted essence out of his head with immense force.

The rider laughed. “I can feel you now. You will come with me.”

“What do you want with him?” called Hannibal.

“To look,” answered the rider. “And feel. And have as my own.”

Hannibal balked. Dimmond had been right. The leader of the Wild Hunt was on the prowl for his mate, and he wanted Will.

He would not have him.

The witcher was a skilled fighter, superior to his peers, quick and graceful and brutal in his attacks. But he also knew when there was no chance, and as he took in the riders, he knew their number was too vast. The odds were not in his favor this time. So he turned on his heel, grabbed Will around the waist with his free arm, and bolted for Winston.

She was ready for him. As soon as Hannibal had thrown Will into the saddle, and jumped up behind, she was off, her gallop like the wind. The Wild Hunt pursued, hooves hammering against the forest floor as they gained speed. An arrow loosed sailed past Hannibal’s ear, a narrow miss.

“Keep down,” Hannibal yelled to Will, ducking low over the boy’s back to both shield him and spur Winston to run faster, faster.

They were keeping the lead, barely, but when they passed a crumbling crag of the mountainside, a hound leaped from the shadows, behemoth claws swiping like daggers. Hannibal slammed the hilt of his sword into the warped canine’s head, and it lost its purchase and fell to the dust on the road behind them.

“Hannibal!” Will yelled, and he twisted in the saddle to look upon him, but the movement brought a spasm of pain, and his hand went to grip at his stomach. He looked down, and saw his hand, slick with blood. The hound had sliced into his stomach.

He didn’t have to tell Hannibal, because Hannibal smelled Will’s blood. Without looking behind him, Hannibal held back his hand and cast an Ignii sign, as strong as he could muster. A blast of fire streamed behind them, the heat of it warming Hannibal’s back. He dared a look back. The riders not burning with the magic flame were stopping.

The witcher sheathed his sword and wrapped his free arm tight around Will's stomach, trying to squelch the oozing wound.

"Foolish, Will," he said at the boy's ear. "You were supposed to leave."

"I couldn't leave without you," he answered weakly.

Hannibal kicked at Winston's side. "Move!" he yelled. If he could keep the Hunt off their trail until they reached Kaer Morhen, he could save Will before he bled to death in his arms.

Hannibal cradled Will's head in his hands, his torn body laid out on the cold, metal surface of the laboratory table. The boy had fluttered in and out of consciousness as they'd ridden hard through the dense forest, until they had finally passed through the gates of Kaer Morhen. For now, they had lost the Wild Hunt, but Hannibal smoothed his thumb over Will's pale face and cared only for the prevention of losing him.

The boy's eyes, held open weakly, their light growing dimmer by the second, sought Hannibal's, and his lips parted to speak. He choked with the effort, specks of blood dripping from the corners of his mouth, rolling down his jaw.

"Hush," whispered Hannibal, but Will was trying again, pulling in shallow, rattling breaths.

"Don't do it," Will said.

Hannibal had already gathered what he needed and the herbal potions stood in slender glass bottles, uncorked and waiting. Beside them were the bloody instruments Hannibal had used desperately sewing up Will's stomach. But he'd lost so much blood. Hannibal's skin was dark against Will's where he stroked Will's cheek, and down over his throat where Will was trying so hard to keep breathing.

"You will die if I don't," said Hannibal. He reached for a formula without leaving Will's side.

"Let me die."

Hannibal did not tell Will that seven out of ten apprentices did not survive the Trial of Grasses, or that the consumption of the special alchemical ingredients would cause incredible agony. If Will survived the trial, he would be a witcher, and the new abilities of his body would restore him to health. Definite, immediate death by blood loss or seventy percent chance of dying in agony with a small chance of survival. Those were the choices Hannibal faced.

Will's eyes fell shut, long lashes fluttering against too-white skin.

"Will?" Hannibal asked. When there was no response, Hannibal held the boy's chin in his hand firmly. "Will?" But he was unconscious. The witcher held the bottle to Will's lips. He hesitated, then he decided. Silver strands of hair fell loose from his hair tie as he bent over to kiss Will softly on his forehead, and then he tipped the glass and the liquid slipped through parched lips.

Hannibal quickly set down the glass and took Will's hand in his. He squeezed it tight when the effects of the grasses began to take effect, and it was only a relief that Will was still alive to scream from the pain as his chest arched from the table. Hannibal remembered that agony. All witchers endured the Trial of the Grasses. It was the mutations from the herbs that granted witchers their catlike eyes and lightning quick reflexes. With a small sorrow, Hannibal thought that if Will's eyes ever opened again, they would not be the same. He did not let go of his hand until the spasms of his torture desisted and his screams were traded for light groans.

The man felt the boy's pulse. "You're doing so well, Will," he said as he reached for the second bottle of potion. The boy tossed his head from side to side, trying to shake Hannibal off as he once again grasped his chin in one hand, and with the other poured the liquid down his throat. Again, Hannibal took his hand and braced for the screaming.

It was an almost equal pain, Hannibal mused, having to listen to Will's suffering whilst he could do nothing to stop it. But he endured, as Will endured, and together they rode out the second potion's torture. At the end of it, Will was so breathless, his chest pumped up and down and he wheezed from the strain. Tears wet his face. He could not speak during that brief pause as Hannibal reached for the third and final potion, but he was still alive.

"You're strong, Will," he said, emptying the final potion into Will's open mouth. "You will be stronger for this."

Will squeezed back this time when Hannibal took his hand. Then the boy began shaking so violently that Hannibal had to hold him down, and he screamed, screamed in throat-tearing pain until Hannibal's own eyes were tearful from it.

Eventually it stopped, and Will's body stilled, and his chest barely moved, and his heart hardly beat.

"It's over," Hannibal said, to himself and to Will. Needing to touch him, Hannibal let his fingers slide through Will's damp hair. He curled a thick strand that framed the boy's face around a finger. It had turned white, a stark stripe of light against a backdrop of sable curls.

Eyes flew open, electric blue, with flecks of gold around slit pupils, like a cat.

"Will, can you hear me?" asked Hannibal, placing his fingers at the pulse point of the boy's neck. His heartbeat was normal. "Will."

There was a span of time when Hannibal thought Will would shut his eyes and drift to sleep. But Will did speak, after a time, in a hushed rasp. "Don't touch me."

Will was awake, and he wondered if he had ever been truly awake before in his whole life. His blood was singing in his veins. He opened his eyes and saw Hannibal in crystal sharpness above him. He felt him without meaning to, without trying, felt him clearly and fully as he had never been able to feel before. Hannibal's thoughts and emotions were sinking into him, red-hot and rough. His touch on Will's skin was too much, he felt it too much.

“Don’t touch me,” Will said, unable to take any more. He was overwhelmed by the man in his presence. Hannibal was directing so much at Will, he couldn’t even decipher it.

The witcher pulled his hand away, but he leaned close over Will, so close, too close, too much.

“Don’t!” Will yelled, pushing Hannibal away, and sending him several steps back. He was stronger. He sat up from the table, adrenaline beginning to pump through his system. His hand traced the new scar across his stomach. Healed.

He looked up through a strand of white hair. “No.”

He leapt from the table, backing away from Hannibal.

“Will, your body has just undergone an astonishing amount of stress,” the man was saying, but the sound of his voice, the lilt, the vibration, it was more than Will could stand, amplified and aching.

“What did you do to me?!”

“I could not lose you,” said Hannibal. He crossed the distance between them and took Will by the shoulders. “I know the confusion you are feeling, and it will fade. You will adjust to the mutations.”

“I can’t stand it! Get your hands off me!” Will yelled, and he pulled out of Hannibal’s grip, holding his hands out in front of him in warning. They shook.

“Will,” soothed Hannibal.

“I can’t be here with you,” warned Will. His head was drowning in Hannibal. “I’m leaving. Don’t follow me.”

The witcher frowned. “I believe that would be an unwise decision in your delicate state.”

Will was backing away. “What you believe is not my concern. I don’t want to be near you. I never want to see you again. Don’t follow me.”

All Hannibal could say was “Will.”

And then Will turned from him and darted from the room.

Hannibal made the choice to let him go. He would make a run for it, and by the time Hannibal had tracked him, he would be cooled off. Then he would see that Hannibal had made the right decision.

Will was alive, and it was well worth his temporary anger.

Hannibal restocked his pack, watered Winston, and polished his sword before he left the gates of Kaer Morhen to follow the path to Will, who would forgive him and stay with him.

And then Hannibal felt a sharp pain in the back of his head, and his world turned dark.

His last thoughts were of Will, smiling at him in the light of a fire.

Chapter 7

The man's footsteps were silent as he scaled the steep stairs to the hilltop. Only a crescent moon hanged low to illuminate his path, but the man did not need more light than that to see. The higher he climbed, the stronger the wind that whipped relentlessly, hair only saved from tangling by the leather tie gathering it at the nape of his neck.

He was close now. He had been tracking it since dusk, and now the dawn threatened the horizon with the first faint blossom of pinkened sky. With a few more carefully placed steps of his boots, he reached the flattened hilltop and smiled triumphantly at the view before him.

A heap of straws and grasses and sticks formed a large nest on the center of the plateau. Strewn messily about the nest were bones, which crunched under the man's light steps. The witcher had found his monster's lair, now all he had to do was wait for her to come home.

He would kill it, return for his payment, and return to his path until he learned of other contracts, other problems that needed fixing with the sole skills of a witcher.

The griffin, soaring toward the hill, would not be the man's first contract fulfilled, for he had been traveling, relentlessly working from town to town, from north to south, in White Orchard now, for the past six months. When he was not in the company of monsters or townsfolk, he was alone. He was used to it. And besides, companions were a nuisance.

The witcher raised his sword, steel and not silver, for he had no silver sword and knew not where to find one, and felt for the griffin with his mind. He found her instantly, light through her wings, blue freedom. She was a creature uncaring for the laws of man, and she had relished maiming the unlucky peasants of the orchard town. The witcher hated killing her.

But that did not stop him, and with a raised sword and bow to the griffin as she loomed overhead, Will fell into the dance.

He knew no magic signs and had scarce combat training, those witcher tricks lost to him when he had been lost. But Will had a greater skill, which his mutations had only enhanced, and it was with this peculiar skill that the young witcher had managed to survive on his own. Not that survival was at the forefront of his mind as he swung his sword heavily over the griffin's heavy wing.

The ways to kill something with a sword, he had picked up quickly. He was a quick study, after all. But he was mildly surprised, as he sensed the griffin's descending beak seconds before the movement and was ready for her with a sweeping blade to the neck, that he was still alive.

After Kaer Morhen, Will had waited in the next town. He had waited for two weeks. Then he had moved on and not looked back, or even allowed himself to think back.

He tucked a loose strand of his hair, the piece that curled white, behind his ear, and shoved his trophy into a sack. The blood of the griffin's head gathered and dripped from the bottom

of the soaked linen. The sun was rising now. Just as well, thought Will, that he had little time to sleep these days. As a witcher, he found he required little actual sleep. Sometimes he would merely sit, close his eyes, and let his mind drift, and garner energy in that way. He preferred it, actually, because when sleep did find him, so did the dreams.

Black visions of a man whipped and beaten. Silver hair slick with blood. Golden eyes glowing in the dark.

But Will chased those thoughts from his head as he began his way down the hilltop by light of the rising sun. He focused only on his return to White Orchard, and the payment he would receive for the contract, and where the witcher's path would lead him next.

On his return to town, Will only needed to pause for as long as it took to retreat into his mind and construct his wall. This, too, had been improved when he had become a witcher. He entered villages, like he entered the tavern now, with little to no battering to his mind. He felt the patrons, knew their thoughts, but he no longer drowned in them. He had not drowned in another's emotions since him, but he would not think on it.

The woman was waiting for him where she said she would be, sipping coffee in the far corner of the tavern, her blonde hair catching the early morning light through the window by which she was positioned. Will walked past a few others on his way to her, earning a gasp when the bloody sack was seen.

The blonde fixed him with a cool gaze as he took a seat at her table and placed the crimson stained sack between them.

"A morbid centerpiece for breakfast," she said.

"It's the most important meal of the day," said Will.

"Your theatrics remind me of someone."

"Your coin reminds me of something. That I don't have it yet."

The woman slid a hefty leather pouch across the table, and Will swiftly palmed it, and made to stand from the table.

"If you'll excuse me, I don't like to stick around after," he told her, but she was standing up with him and placing her hand on his bicep, halting him.

"Alana sends her best," she whispered.

Will cast a sidelong look at the icy blonde woman. "Who are you, exactly?"

"My name is Bedelia, and the Lodge has been looking for you for quite some time," she said, voice still low, cadence strange and hypnotically flat.

Will pulled himself from her grasp on his arm and fastened the coin purse to his belt. “I am past the help of the Lodge, Bedelia. You can tell Alana that,” he said, and he turned to leave.

“I’m not here for the Lodge, Will,” she called after him. “I’m here for Hannibal.” The name stopped him stock-still. He heard the clip-clop of her heeled boots as she stepped up behind him and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Have you not ached for him?”

Will turned to her, eyes wide, pupils slit through electric pools of blue. “How do you know him?” he could not bring himself to say the name. Could hardly bring himself to think it.

“Hannibal and I have known each other for a long time,” was her slow reply. “He wrote to me of you.”

That raised Will’s brows. “Oh?”

“And based on the content of his letter, I was shocked to discover you had taken no steps in his rescue.”

The young witcher’s heart nearly broke free from his chest, and he said, “Vagueness suits you, Bedelia, but I’m in no mood for it. Tell me what you mean.”

Bedelia led Will back to the corner table before continuing. “You know of his capture?”

Will shook his head, confused. “No. No, we parted ways at Kaer Morhen. I thought he might find me after, but…I have not seen him in many months.”

“Selfish, thoughtless boy,” she hissed. “Did you ignore the dreams then?”

“Dreams?” he asked, taken by surprise. “How do you know--”

“You’ve been seeing him in your sleep, haven’t you?” she asked him, steely-eyed.

“No,” Will lied, backing away from the woman with hurried steps. “I have given him no thought. I’m free of him.”

“But that’s not true, is it?” she asked as she took up her coffee to sip, steam rising in swirls of white vapor.

Will shook his head, his curls falling wild across his brow. His lips parted to speak, but he had no words for her, or for himself, and with a staggering heart, he fled the tavern.

He made camp in the woods that night with no fire or dinner, only the cover of night and a bottle of spiced wine he’d procured from a traveling merchant. Sleep found him easier when he was full of drink, and Will needed to sleep that night. He needed to dream, to prove to himself that what Bedelia had told him was not true, that he had not been having visions of Hannibal every time he closed his eyes. He had seen the man, yes, but the images had been imaginings of his own mind, not flashes of reality.

Hannibal had heeded his wish never to see him again, and that was it. That was why he had not followed Will, when Will had been so sure he would. It could not be that the real reason he had not followed was because he had been taken. Will would not abide the possibility, therefore he pulled long swallows from his bottle, and waited for a drunken sleep to claim him.

Somewhere, far away, Hannibal held his head high as the laughter of a Wild Huntsman rang in his ears.

“The boy is reaching for you again, witcher,” the gravelly voice said. He raised the spike-tailed whip above his head. “Should we give him something sweet to see?”

The witcher was silent and unresponsive as the whip cut deep grooves across his back, but inside his head he hummed a constant mantra. “Will. Will. Will.”

Will.

“Hannibal!” Will shouted as his eyes shot open, all-seeing blue in the blackness of the starless night. He came to his knees, body hunched and brain on fire with the imprint of Hannibal being mercilessly beaten.

Bedelia’s words crashed around his head. “His rescue. Captured. Selfish.” Bile rose in his throat, and he wretched. Hannibal had not followed because Hannibal had been taken, Will knew it now. His dreams had been real. For months, Hannibal had been tortured, ceaselessly tortured, while Will had been too busy pretending to hate him to realize something was wrong.

A groan rumbled from the pit of Will’s stomach. “Should we give him something sweet to see?” the captor had snarled. The voice vibrated in Will’s skull, and then he knew.

The Wild Hunt had Hannibal.

And Will was going to get him back.

He found her at the tavern, but instead of coffee she held a glass full with amber liquid. She looked entirely unsurprised to see him as he sank into the chair beside her at the bar. The tavern was doing a hearty business for the late hour, and lanterns filled the room with golden light. Will’s walls were held high against the onslaught of intoxicated minds. He felt only for Bedelia’s, her mind’s touch like chilled ivory.

“Bad dream?” she asked him with a smirk.

Will held a hand up for the barkeep and put down a coin for a mug of ale. “You didn’t come all the way here to make snide remarks, Bedelia,” Will said, taking up the mug to keep his

hands occupied so they didn't tap nervously against the bar.

"You did not come all the way here for the drinks."

"Or the company," Will said, voice thick with irritation. Bedelia sat up straight-backed on her stool, queen of the tavern. "I have a proposition for you," he said.

"It's reckless," she said as she sat across from Will on the floor of their rented room at the inn. "It's exactly what they're expecting you to do."

"Better to be reckless than restless. Do you have a better idea?" the young witcher asked the sorceress.

"Yes. Let me gather Alana and the others, and they can help you."

"I can't wait that long," said Will, shaking his head.

"You mean you won't wait that long."

"No, I won't. You came to find me, because you knew the Lodge would move too slow or not at all." She had not said so, but he sensed it from her, clear as if she had told him herself. "So help me now."

She paused, and then raised her hands to set cool fingertips to his temples. "Send Hannibal my regards," she said. "Are you sure?"

"Irrefutably sure," he answered. He shut his eyes, brought down his wall, and let Bedelia trudge into his mind, bringing with her the throng of townspeople.

He was bombarded, like he had been in Lindenvale, like he had been when he was small and his father had to move from town to town, not understanding why his son trembled and panted like a freak when too many people were near. Not since Alana had taught him how to keep his mind at bay had he been rocked so earnestly by the emotions of others. He tried to catch his breath now, and could not. He knew he would be breathless. He knew he would blackout from the exhaustion of it, the pain. Nowhere near Hannibal's pain, he remembered as he fell to his hands and knees.

His world was spinning, and he shook uncontrollably on the floor, sweaty and gasping. But that was why Bedelia was there.

She hooked under his arms and brought him to his feet, and the petite blonde dragged him from the inn room.

"Pardon me," she addressed the innkeeper politely. "My friend is sick, could you help me get him outside for some fresh air?"

The innkeeper gave the spastic Will a bewildered look, but then he nodded at the attractive woman and helped her carry Will outside.

“Thank you,” she told the man. He smiled at her and grunted, then headed back in, leaving Bedelia standing by the road with a barely conscious witcher.

She reclaimed her hold of him, and began to pull, dragging him along the empty village road. She dragged him until the grass grew unadulterated by human touch, and then set him down, head cushioned by moon ivy.

Then she opened a portal and walked through, leaving Will fitful and alone and waiting.

The last time he had endured such an episode of the mind, the Wild Hunt had followed in his wake, destroying a nearby village. When they came looking for him now, they would find him among the wildflowers.

Will felt the frost before he felt the gloved hands that lifted him. A soft light brought his lashes to fluttering against his chilled cheeks. Above him, silhouetted against the dawn, was a heavily armored figure, face obscured by a golden, winged helmet. He heard the snorts of hounds, hooves padding over dirt, and smiled, letting his lids drop back over his eyes. They were taking him exactly where he wanted to be.

When he awoke the second time, Will could feel him. He cautioned a tendril of his mind to search about him, and sensed the hot-dark sensation of Hannibal. It was not overpowering, as it had been when he had woken from the Trials, and he cursed himself a thousand times over for ignoring the man’s warning. He had been in no condition to leave. He should have stayed with him.

But he was there now, somewhere, and Will sank into the feeling of him. Until another presence prickled the back of his spine. Ice and bones. The black rider who had pointed his sword at Will and Hannibal had stepped in front of him to shield him from danger.

“I have been waiting for this,” said the voice of the rider, startling Will with his proximity. “You evaded me for a long time.”

Will licked his lips and kept where he was, laid flat on a soft surface. Pillows? The owner of the voice lifted a hand to the face plate of his helmet, and with a click of metal, removed it. A pale, not un-handsome man stared out of its gold frame.

“Did you grow tired of running from the beast at your heels?” he asked, bringing a hand, cold in its encasement of studded gloves, to trace over Will’s lips. “For years I did not feel you,” he said. “And then one day, there you were again, presented to me as if by magic. It was magic, I suppose.”

Will wanted to speak, but hesitated at the fingers that still smoothed over his lower lip. He looked imploringly up at the man.

“You have questions. Ask them,” he said, moving his fingers away to braise instead over the hollow of Will’s throat.

“What is it you want from me?” Will asked.

“Your companionship,” was the answer. “Your mind. Your beauty.”

The declaration disgusted him and injured him. Hannibal had said similar words. Will wished he was hearing them from him now, instead of the man hovering over him, metal-cold hands sliding over Will’s skin with a sinister possessiveness.

“You are thinking of him,” the Huntsman accused, a sour note in his baritone.

“Are we alike, you and I?” asked Will suddenly. “You can feel me, feel my thoughts.”

“Yes. And you feel magnificent.”

“What are you?” Will asked.

“I,” spoke the man as he tightened his hold over Will’s throat, “am the Great Red Dragon.” Only after Will’s eyes began to water did he release him. “The leader of my people. And now that you are here with me, they will be your people, as well.”

“But I have my own people,” said Will, rubbing his hand over the reddened skin of his throat.

The man called the Dragon slammed his hand down beside Will’s head and sneered. “The witcher in his cell, you mean? You are more than he is.”

“I am what he is. A witcher,” Will cried.

The Dragon forced Will up by his hair, pulling the white streak taut in his fist. “Look what he has done to you. He has forced his mark upon you, and you would love him for it?”

Will blinked.

Would he love him for the marks he had made? For setting him free of his father? For bringing him out of the swamp? For helping him learn his own mind? For saving his life from witch hunters, and again from the Wild Hunt? Would he love him?

He would.

In an eruption of speed and strength, Will grasped the Dragon by the wings of his great golden helmet, and twisted until he felt a sickening pop. He let the body drop. His pulse had barely spiked. The young witcher knelt down over the dead dragon and pulled the sword free of its sheath. He closed his eyes until he felt him. Hannibal. He was close.

Will charged down a stone hall toward a gathering of guards. Without pause, he crashed upon them with his blade. They were not monsters, so he could not predict their movements, but he was movement beyond his control, and he met every thrust, every cut, and every slice, with a countering, deadly strike. In seconds, they had fallen, and Will leapt over the bodies, and ran,

ran down another hall, and then another. He cut down two more guards, then two more, always running, always feeling for him with his mind. He was closer.

His witcher eyes honed in on a heavy metal door at the end of the next passage. The three men standing guard in front of it went down like the others, powerless in his path. He snatched the keys from a puddle of blood, and unlocked the door, charged inside.

Hannibal was standing, waiting for him, in the center of the dark cell, feet chained to a ring in the floor, hands bound behind his back, a bag over his head. Will let the sword fall and ran to him. He tore the bag away, grasped Hannibal's face with both hands, and kissed him fiercely on the mouth.

Hannibal kissed him back, their lips rough and claiming, a rush of desperate kisses that had Will pushing himself flush against the older man. His hands traveled down Hannibal's arms and clutched around his waist, pulling him harder against him. When he finally pulled back to breathe, he couldn't stand the distance, and he felt Hannibal's smiling mouth press against his own once more.

"Will," Hannibal said between Will's fervency, "though I would risk life and limb to have you in this way, perhaps we should remove ourselves from this particular facility first."

Will rested his forehead against Hannibal's and inhaled his scent. "Would it be a bad time to admit I like seeing you in these chains?"

Hannibal laughed softly and nuzzled the boy's neck. "Not at all. Though I would suggest you may increase satisfaction by unfastening these chains so you can apply your own later."

"I would chain you to me if I could," Will said. "To never be without you again." He ran his fingers through Hannibal's silver hair. It was dirty, Hannibal was dirty. He was the most wonderful thing Will had ever seen. He leaned in to kiss him once more, softly, and then freed him from his chains.

Together they ran from the cell, stopping only at the pile of bodies outside the door while Hannibal scoured a skewered guard for a sword. Armed and inspired, the witchers tore through the halls of the stone fortress. Will had no idea where they were, or the way out, but every armored man they met on the way was met with a swift blade and death.

Together, they were an unstoppable strength that swept through their enemies with un-harried vigor. Violence, necessary and beautiful, radiated from them as they stood, finally, at the threshold of the fortress. Outside it was storming, the rain pelting down in sheets. Will touched Hannibal's cheek, a smile tugging at the corners of his lips. Then he kissed him, hard, with all his mind and heart.

The witchers were laughing like children as they darted together through the rain and across the bridge that joined land to the fortress on the sea. When they reached the other side, Will was gasping for air through his manic giggling. His hand reached out for Hannibal's, but when he grasped it, the man pulled away from him, and appraised him with wariness, golden eyes narrowing quickly. Head tilted.

Will felt the man’s confusion clouding around him. “Hannibal, are you alright?”

Hannibal smoothed his hair back, slick with rainwater, and frowned at Will. “I don’t know you.”

A smile spread across Will’s face. “I’d like for you to know me very well,” he said, sidling up to him and running his hands over his chest.

When Hannibal grabbed his wrists and threw him off, Will startled. He looked up at Hannibal from the ground to which he’d been thrown, his brows furrowing in his own confusion.

“You have mistaken me for another,” Hannibal said, face dispassionate as he turned away from Will and whistled loudly.

“Hannibal?”

“You would do well to leave me be, boy,” Hannibal said, head turned to watch Winston as she galloped up to his side from seemingly nowhere.

Will jumped to his feet, slipping on the muddy earth beneath him. “Hannibal,” he said, so confused by the sudden turn he knew not what else to say.

Hannibal hoisted himself into the horse’s saddle and looked down at Will. The indifference in his eyes made Will cringe. And then Hannibal clicked for Winston to go, and they were off. Will watched, flabbergasted, as Hannibal disappeared into the trees.

He didn't remember him.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will was confused. But not as confused as Alana and Margot when he burst through their bedroom door in the middle of the night.

He had traveled tirelessly until he reached Novigrad. Wary of witch hunters, he waited until the cover of darkness. Then he weaved his way through the city until he was through the third story window of the Passiflora. He had come such a long way since his previous visit. And he still wasn't a fan.

In their bed, the couple was seething.

“Alana, I need your help,” he said.

“Will?” the sorceress asked, squinting in the dark. Beside her, Margot sighed heavily.

“Is that the one who’s always in danger?” she asked.

Alana shushed her and slipped from the covers. She had only a thin slip covering her, but she moved to Will’s side, unabashed. She lifted her hand, palm up, and a ball of light drifted from her skin to the bedside lantern.

“Hi, Will,” she said, offering him a gentle smile.

“I’ve changed since you last saw me, I think,” he said.

“Good changes?” she asked, her eyes drawn to the streak of white in the front of Will’s dark mane of hair.

The young witcher paused, wondering. Then he felt his shoulders droop, and Alana’s soft hands wrapping around him in an unexpectedly warm embrace. The contact, so kind, so intimate, made Will’s chest tighten painfully. He had held Hannibal in such a way. Before he’d been cast aside in the mud.

“Will, what’s happened?” the sorceress asked as she pulled away from him.

Margot was out of bed now, and pouring a glass of whiskey. The taller woman, draped in a royal blue robe of silk, held the drink out for Will. He tried to smile at her but found he could not, and took the offered glass silently.

The women led him to sit on the loveseat, and he sank wearily amongst the feather-filled cushions. They said nothing as he downed the alcohol in one gulp, and handed the glass back to Margot. Then he put his head in his hands, fingers clawing through the chestnut spirals.

“Is it Hannibal?” Alana asked him after a thoughtful silence. “Bedelia told us she saw you, that you went to him.”

Will coughed into his elbow and cleared his throat. His eyes were stinging. “I did go to him,” he answered at last. He tried not to notice Alana’s slight stiffening when she met his catlike eyes. “But I lost him all the same.”

Alana exchanged glances with her partner, and Margot squeezed her shoulder before rising and leaving them alone in the room, though not without pouring herself a drink to take with her first. When the rattling of glasses had stilled and the bedroom door had shut, Alana sat with Will’s hand in hers.

“A witcher’s life is a treacherous life, Will,” she said. “Hannibal knew that and accepted it. You can’t feel guilty for his death. None of this has been your fault.”

Will laughed and the sound was an ugly, abrupt thing. “I am the dead one,” he told her. “Dead in his eyes.”

Alana’s dark eyebrows furrowed, drawing thin lines across her forehead. “I don’t understand.”

“He’s alive,” explained Will. “The rescue was a success.” He laughed again and dragged his hand over his face. “But he’s forgotten me.”

“That doesn’t sound like Hannibal,” reasoned Alana. “He was a captive for six months, Will. His strength is formidable, but even a witcher can be susceptible to prolonged exposure to torture and its repercussions. If you’ve quarreled, it may be all he needs is time. He’s experienced a trauma. You both have.”

Will looked at her. She appeared content with her diagnosis. Buried deep beneath the depths of his sorrow, Will felt joy as he pulled the rug out and said, “He doesn’t remember me, Alana.”

Her head turned slightly to the side to hear him better.

“He has forgotten me. Literally.”

“Oh.” She took a moment to gather her thoughts, assessed them, and then asked with only a hint of hesitance, “Have you considered that might be for the best?”

He made no outward show of expression, and for a brief instant Alana thought she was looking at Hannibal. When he spoke again, it was with his head turned away from her, eyes watching his reflection in the darkened panes of the window.

“I haven’t considered it,” he said. His likeness stared back at him, blank and empty. Will hardly recognized himself. Behind him, Alana stood, her fingers pressed to her forehead, massaging the ache Will had undoubtedly fitted her with.

“Shouldn’t you?” she ventured cautiously. “Consider it?”

“Hannibal wouldn’t consider it,” he said quietly. “He would have ignored my wishes and thrown me over his shoulder, whether I remembered him or not.”

“And you didn’t do that.”

“I should have tried,” he said, trying to ease his shoulders from their shaking. “I should have done something other than stare like an idiot and watch him ride away.”

“Will,” said Alana, coming to stand by the window. She opened it, and Will’s reflection was lost to the night. “Is it possible that you’re confusing Hannibal’s actions somehow?”

“Oh, I definitely am,” he said. “But the last time I was confused by Hannibal, he spent half a year in torment. I won’t make that mistake again.”

“Fair enough,” she said, arms crossing over her chest. A cold draft drifted through the open window and rustled the bottom of her slip. It pushed back Will’s hair, and Alana was taken aback once more by his dagger-thin pupils. “Tell me what you think has happened.”

“He knew me until he didn’t,” Will said, struggling for the best route of explanation. “He was fine, and then he acted like we’d never met.”

She considered. “Can you tell me the moment he began acting that way?”

Will went back in his mind. He kissed him in the doorway. They ran through the rain, laughing. They crossed the bridge. The young witcher looked up, a sudden brightness in his features. “When we had crossed the bridge.”

The sorceress nodded. “It could be an enchantment.”

“Could be?”

“It’s not unheard of. If Hannibal was a prisoner at the Hunter’s fortress, he could have been spelled to forget certain things on the event of his escape. But Will,” she said delicately, like she feared he may break, “you can’t be sure.”

Will stood from the seat and crossed the room to join Alana at the open window. The night breeze cooled his fevered skin. “Nothing short of magic would keep him from me.” He fixed her with a challenging, electric gaze. “Now tell me how to fix it.”

“It won’t be easy,” she had explained. Will thought over their conversation as he glided through the early morning Novigrad streets. Merchants were setting up their stands, drunks were staggering home from the taverns. One ran right into Will, in fact, as he pushed open the door of the Golden Sturgeon.

“There is a powerful spirit,” Alana had told him as he’d leaned forward eagerly to listen. “A djinn. A condensation of the element of air. It’s powerful, Will, and deadly.”

Will scanned the interior of the tavern. Right off the Novigrad docks, it was one of the busiest businesses in the city, frequented day and night by dockworkers and the ship crews that moved merchandise and travelers in and out of the crowded harbor.

“They’re conscious beings,” Alana had warned. “And nasty.”

“So am I,” Will had pointed out. “How can it help me?”

He spied a woman standing at the bar and wound his way through the lingering patrons until he reached her.

“The legends say a djinn can grant any wish in the world, no matter how far-fetched,” the sorceress had told him. “But Will, listen to me. They are extremely difficult to control.”

The woman at the bar sensed Will standing behind her and turned around.

“I can make it grant me a wish,” Will had professed, and Alana had sighed.

“You can try.”

Will would try, and he would succeed, and he knew exactly what he would wish for, and these were the thoughts spinning around his mind when the woman smiled at him with a quirk of a finely kept eyebrow.

“If you didn’t look like you could kick my ass, I’d ask you how much you’d cost me for the night,” she said with a laugh.

“It’s the morning,” Will responded earnestly. “But you can have me for free if you let me on your ship when it sets sail.”

She looked amused as she put a hand on her hip and looked the witcher up and down. “A ride on Atropos is one thousand crowns,” she said matter-of-factly.

“What if,” he began slyly, “I didn’t have the money, but desperately needed to get to Skellige?”

“Keep asking nicely with that face of yours, and I’ll probably give you the damn ship,” she said, holding out her hand. “I’m Katz.”

Will took her hand, shaking it firmly, and tried to keep the humor out of his voice when he asked, “Captain Katz?”

“That’s right. You a witcher?”

“That’s right,” he said. “Will.”

“Witcher Will?” she teased, and he nodded. “Here’s the deal, then. The passage to the islands has been riddled with pirates lately. It’s so bad, most everyone else is too scared to make the journey.”

“I’m guessing Captain Katz isn’t too scared,” said Will.

“Damn right. Especially not with a witcher on board in case of trouble. We sail at noon,” she told him before turning back to the bar to throw back the shot of clear liquid awaiting her.

Will bit his lip, looked toward the docks, then back at the sea captain. “Um. Which ship is yours?”

Katz slammed the shot glass down on the bar and her silky black hair fell down her back when she looked over her shoulder at Will. “The big one.”

And so, as the sun shone high in the midday sky and the Atropos pulled away from the Novigrad docks, Will stood on its deck, his face tipped back to soak in the yellow light.

“Where can I find a djinn?” he had asked Alana in the final minutes before sunrise.

“There is a small island off the coast of Skellige where one is rumored to live in the belly of a shipwreck.”

Will had squeezed her hand before he’d left. “Thank you.”

When he had gone to find the captain, Alana was not happy. Margot rejoined her, resting her head on Alana’s shoulder.

“He’s going to find Hannibal?” she had asked.

Alana’s eyes remained on the distant figure making his way to the docks on the street below. “He’s going to get himself killed.”

Shattered Reach. That was the island he must find, and it was all Will could focus on as he looked out over the water. The waves swelled and dipped, rippling with a golden light that hypnotized, nudged Will to remember.

Golden eyes regarded him with indifference. The lips he had pressed against moments before pulled into a sneer. The absolutely unexpected change left Will frozen, fallen to his knees in the punishing rain. It had rained the night Hannibal had dragged Will from the swamp, the completion of a full, sadistic circle that kept Will on his knees for a long while after the weather had cleared.

His hands tightened on the rail of the ship, mimicking the tightness in his chest. He had been a man in hell when the Dragon had opened his eyes. And the minutes he had spent in Hannibal’s arms had been too few, too brief. To have realized a piece of himself only to have it stolen in the next breath, it enraged him. And why? To appease an insane, jealous, self-confessed dragon with a crush? The audacity, the ludicrousness. The swamp, the violence, the death, the misery. And in the center of it all, Hannibal. Will had not needed to escape him, because Hannibal had been his escape. And the chains he had promised to ensnare him with were now wrapped around his own throat, and Will was strangling. He was choking. He could not fill his lungs without Hannibal.

“I get the feeling I’m interrupting some serious brooding,” quipped Katz.

Will started from the rails, eyes flying to the captain leaning relaxed beside him.

He shook the gold from behind his eyes and forced an awkward smile.

“Don’t pretend to be happy on my account,” she said. “I’m exhausted just looking at you.”

He wasn’t sure what to say to that, so he looked back out to the water, but he could still feel the captain’s eyes on him, examining.

“Love quest,” she suddenly said.

“What?” Will asked, sure he had misheard.

“Those big eyes, the furrowed brow, the forlorn aura of ‘kill me now.’ I’m just interpreting the evidence,” she said with a shrug. “You’re on a love quest. It’s like in that one poem. I can’t remember who wrote it.”

“Dimmond?”

“That’s it!” she exclaimed. “So.” She looked at him expectantly. When he purposefully ignored her, she asked, “Who is he?”

Will cocked an eyebrow, still not meeting her eyes. “What makes you think he’s a he?”

“Because you asked that instead of denying it,” she said with a crooked smile. “So, Will, is there a happy ending waiting for you on the other side of this sea?”

He found the place in his mind where he was still kissing Hannibal in the dungeon, let himself linger there peacefully, only for a moment. Then he returned to himself. He felt hollow, like his insides had been scraped clean. Consumed by Hannibal.

When he spoke it was barely a whisper. “There has to be.”

The young witcher was prepared for pirates. He had nodded off with his sword still gripped in his fist just in case he woke to trouble.

And because such seemed to be the pattern of his life, trouble did wake Will that night, but not in the manifestation of pirates. Rather, it was a rogue wave that did away with the Atropos. And when Will was torn from his nightmare, he woke to a lungful of saltwater as the entire ship capsized in a viciously random roll of the sea.

Thinking back, Will speculated he only survived because of his witcher mutations. As those in the water around him ran out of air, trapped beneath the overturned ship, Will’s lungs barely burned. When his head finally crested the surface, he spied all around him for other survivors. None.

Though his heart managed a twinge of sadness when he spotted the captain's hat floating by, Will remained a man with a singular mission. He did not linger amongst the wreckage, for there was another wrecked ship he needed to find.

The swim to the Skellige shore was long, and when Will's feet finally hit sand, he collapsed with burning muscles. At that point, the sun was coming up. Another day come and gone. Another day with Hannibal roaming the world without Will. As he coughed up what he guessed to be seaweed, Will pictured his witcher. Where had he headed after he'd fled the fortress? What was he doing? He could be anywhere, doing anything. With anyone. He threw up a mess on the sand, and the foamy tide rinsed it away.

With commendable strength of every kind, Will lifted himself from the Skellige beach and threw a spiteful glare at the rising sun. No more suns would set over a world in which Hannibal did not know Will. That was a promise.

And Will always kept his promises.

Alana's warnings ran through Will's mind as he approached the abandoned island in his rusty, definitely stolen fisherman's boat.

"An unusually powerful mage can capture and tame the djinn, but only a rare few have ever managed it."

"Djinns won't submit to domination, Will. It will fight you."

"The more damage you deal it, the more powerful it becomes."

Perfectly reasonable warnings that had no place in Will's nonsensical head. He was a man possessed, and therefore unreachable by reason. He had neither the magic nor the silver to hope to defeat the djinn. But somehow that didn't matter as he pulled his little boat upon the shore. He would face the djinn and learn his ending, whether it be happy or sad was not up to him. Whatever happened would happen, because it had to.

And without hesitation, Will climbed from the boat.

The great ship had wrecked along the shore of Shattered Reach, and Will stared, fascinated. It was huge. On closer inspection, Will discovered a hole revealing the ship's innards. It was just big enough for a slight, determined witcher, and he slipped through, entering the pitch black belly of the beast.

He could see, of course, and it almost made him smile, remembering the times he had blushed in the dark and thought Hannibal could not see. He had seen him then. Hannibal had been the only one to ever see him. Will tightened his grip around the hilt of his sword and stepped forward, sending the old floorboards squawking.

Then a light revealed itself, blinking red on the far side of the cabin in which Will had placed himself. He went into his mind to seek the light. He smiled when he found it. It was power incarnate. Smoky and bitter.

The djinn.

Will raised his sword, then his voice. “I seek you,” he said slowly.

He felt the djinn acknowledge him and blood rushed in his ears as he prepared for its attack.

It did nothing.

Will felt a bit foolish as he stepped forward, sword still at the ready. “I demand your…” he paused, biting at his lower lip, desperately seeking his next word, “…help.”

The djinn flared and a bright force pulsed from the center of red light, sending Will crashing across the room.

In Crow’s Perch, Hannibal stalked in a circle, fists lifted, bare-chested, and covered in dirt.

A crowd of soot-smudged men surrounded the witcher and his opponent, yelling and stamping their feet. The clink of crowns passing from one greasy hand to the next filled the air, and the tangy smell of blood. Of course, Hannibal was the only one to smell the blood. And it wasn’t his. It was never his.

He flew forward, heavy fist connecting with effort-soaked flesh. His opponent, a generous title for a man already so terribly beaten, threw an elbow at the witcher’s chin, and Hannibal sidestepped it with effortless elegance that brought a unanimous jeer from the audience. Hannibal growled, the violence romancing him, and grasped the man around the waist, and heaved him over his shoulder. More coins were exchanged. The man’s weight resting on his shoulder made him pause, bringing a curious flutter to his stomach, but then it was gone, and the witcher flung the man free. Something crunched when he smashed face first into the ground.

The crowd was a roar of mannish exuberance, and the overseer of the brawl lifted Hannibal’s arm into the air.

“The new champion of Crow’s Perch is Hannibal the Cannibal!” he bellowed to the onlookers.

"Don't call me that, please," Hannibal said.

"But it rhymes!"

Hannibal was blank-faced as he resumed ownership of his arm and accepted the plentiful pouch of his earnings. He left the fighting ring and headed straight for the tavern, where he slammed down a portion of crowns in exchange for a tall cup of spiced wine.

The past few days had an odd flavor about them, and Hannibal had been trying his best to wash it out with as much adrenaline and alcohol as possible. Unlike him, he knew, to fill himself in that way, but there was a nagging sensation he couldn't shake, coloring his thoughts and keeping him awake. So he drank, and he participated in the filthy human fist-a-cuff competitions. He had taken three monster contracts in as many days. He was tireless and sharp around his edges.

And something was wrong.

A corner of him, burrowed in the center of his chest, was nagging and poking. He sipped his wine, grimaced at the taste. Crow's Perch was dirty, one of those places that seemed under constant cloud cover. But Hannibal found it befitting to his mood. No sunshine.

When he had finished his wine, he mounted Winston and left the town. He tipped his face to the overcast sky and felt the first drops of rain. He felt that overpowering rush of wrongness in his chest. A tingling in his stomach. The rain stirred something. It was familiar, but he couldn't…he couldn't see why…

The witcher gave his silver head a shake, but it did not shake the feeling.

Winston trotted along down the grey road, her rider uncharacteristically shifty in the saddle, until he finally pulled her to a stop. He dismounted, hands sliding through his hair as he walked, Winston shadowing him.

The tingling was growing, worsening, becoming unbearable, and Hannibal wondered vaguely if he was about to die. He tilted his head, eyes closed, and thought. Could it be poison that had his heart racing? He would have known before know, before his lungs began to squeeze as if in the clutch of a giant's fist.

The rain fell harder, plastering long strands to his face. He slicked it back, gathering it to tie at the nape of his neck. The movement brought him pause. Familiar.

Winston whinnied beside him.

"Winston," he whispered. "Winston." He had never named his beast of burden, and yet there she stood. Named.

An unusual name for an unusual horse.

Hannibal clenched his jaw, frustrated, confused.

Take my drink, take my heart.

His head was spinning, electric blue burning his lids like fire.

I couldn't leave without you.

A smiling face, alight from the glow of a bonfire.

A cowering figure on a threadbare carpet.

Hannibal collapsed to the ground in the middle of the road. He turned to his back, facing the sky.

Do you have a name? His own words rang to him through a dense fog.

Above him, a black cloud drifted in the wind, and a patch of sunlight worked itself free.

And reaching him clearly in the muddle of his mind was the vision of a poor fisherman's whelp struggling against him. Hannibal could almost breathe in his scent as the boy twisted in the saddle to glare at him.

My name is Will.

A wounded sound escaped Hannibal's lips as it returned to him, all of it, in a final flash of red light.

His capture, his rescue, his love. And then his betrayal, as he threw his apprentice to the mud and rode away.

"Winston, what have I done?" he asked the horse. She snorted judgmentally before ducking down her head and nuzzling Hannibal's shoulder. "Yes. I think it is time we leave, as well."

He made excellent time to Novigrad, arriving the next day just as the sun was setting. He handed Winston off to the stable hand after giving her a friendly pet, and stole away to the Passiflora, where he breezed past Aiden in his purple settee, Margot with her whiskey glass, and walked straight up to Alana.

Her eyes filled with tears when she saw him.

"Tears of happiness to see me, Alana?" he asked her pleasantly. "Were you so worried after my well being? It must have been a difficult few months for you."

She was frowning and shaking her head, wide-eyed. "Oh, Hannibal," she said.

"What is troubling you?" He cast a look at Margot in her armchair. "Trouble in paradise?"

Her voice trembled, but she did not allow the gathered tears to drop. "I don't think you remember, Hannibal," she said. "But there's been an accident."

This drew his curiosity. "What kind of accident, Alana?"

She sighed, gathering herself before her answer. "A ship went down with someone very dear on board."

Hannibal narrowed his eyes at her and refused to let his heart stop beating. "Who was on the ship, Alana?" he asked, dangerously quiet.

She looked at him with sad eyes full of sympathy. “I don’t think you remember him.” She paused, sniffling. “But his name was Will.”

He blinked once, twice. Then he turned and walked slowly from the room. Down the spiraling staircase. Past the collared boy. Down the second staircase. Out the door.

He went to the stables, tipped the stable hand, and led Winston by the reins. They walked through the city until they reached the gates. Hannibal led Winston across the bridge. He walked her to the tailor shop, where he could hear Jimmy and Brian bickering over the tape measure inside. After he tied Winston to the post, he held his forehead against hers and whispered.

Then he began his walk to the river. He would keep his armor on, his swords. It wouldn’t be fast, but it would do. He would lose his breath beneath the water, as Will had lost his. They would be chained together in this way. In death if not life.

He waded into the water.

“What are you doing?” said a voice from the river bank.

Hannibal stopped. His boots were heavy and waterlogged when he turned.

“I was looking for someone,” he answered. He walked slowly back up the bank, soaking wet from the waist down.

Will stood with his arms crossed over his chest, watching as the witcher made his way to stand before him. “In the river?” he asked with raised eyebrows.

Hannibal brought his hand to brush down the side of the boy’s face. “In the river. In the swamp. Wherever he might be.”

“You remember?” Will asked, leaning into the man’s warm hand on his cheek.

“You’re alive?” asked Hannibal, his thumb gliding over the sensitive flesh of Will’s ear.

Will would laugh. He would throw his head back and laugh and ask what in the world Hannibal was talking about.

Hannibal would be curious. He would ask why he’d lost his memory, how he’d gotten it back.

Will would tell him about the djinn. Hannibal would ask how he’d managed, not believing the answer.

But that would come later.

Now, Hannibal grabbed Will’s waist and pulled him close. He buried his nose in Will’s neck, scenting him, breathing him. Will ran his hands through Hannibal’s hair, silver and soot and blonde and whatever color it was. He tugged the older man’s head back and kissed him.

They had made their choices.

And now was the time to enjoy them.

Chapter End Notes

And this is where we leave our boys for now, kissing on the riverbank. I think they've earned it.

But it's a big bad world, and I'm not sure they can stay out of it for long...

Thank you for joining them on their first adventure! I hope you enjoyed it. :)

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!